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Slippery Fish, Material Words:
The Substance of Subsistence in Coastal Sierra Leone

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Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Social Anthropology

University of Sussex
October 2014

This thesis is dedicated to Pa Yanker, who is the wisest person I know; and to Salta, who is the strongest.

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Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been, and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another university for the award of any other degree.

Signature:

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the ESRC for funding this research. I owe a great debt to Madame Doris Lenga-Koroma, for welcoming me so warmly into her chieftdom, and to Pa Harry Williams, for allowing me to live in his house in Tissana.

I was fortunate to have three wonderful mentors on this project: my supervisors, James Fairhead and Dinah Rajak, and my teacher (of Sherbro and many other things), Pa Yanker. All three were supportive, patient, good-humoured — and brilliantly clever.

In Tissana, I remember the members of my complex extended household with enormous fondness. The open-mindedness and open-heartedness with which they welcomed me into their home were extraordinary. In particular, I owe a great debt to Joseph, who was not only a kind, generous host, but also my dream research collaborator; and to Salta, who looked after me so dotingly that our neighbours sometimes jokingly called her my ‘mother’. A twice-divorced foster mother of two, she was a wonderful raconteur with big laugh and a fiery temper, who threw herself wholeheartedly into the business of educating me about life on the Kagboro coast. I hope to see you all again very soon.

Back in the UK, I can’t say how grateful I am to my parents, Marion and Mike Diggins, for offering me a place of peace, laughter and refuge every time that I needed it. I have been lucky to have the most wonderful housemates in Brighton, too: Sammy, Alia, Vanessa and Eric — your generous spirits and incredible cooking have nourished my body and my soul.

I am grateful, too, to David Pratten and Andrea Cornwall for their careful reading of a previous version of this thesis.

Finally, Beth, you are my phone-man! It’s been a crazy, amazing year, and somehow we have both survived a double PhD submission, with our sanity, humour – and love – intact.

A Note on Translations

Tissana is a highly multilingual community. Of the five languages commonly spoken, I became more or less fluent in the *lingua franca*, Krio, and developed in intermediate proficiency in the indigenous language of this coastline, Sherbro.

Almost all the conversations quoted in this thesis were conducted in Krio and translated by me into English. Where no adequate English translation exists for a word, I have retained the Krio terminology. However, ambiguity does occasionally arise as a result of the closeness between English and Krio. Below is a list of Krio terms used in this thesis, including a few which appear familiar but have a subtly different meaning than English speakers might assume.

Alehn	A wharf town; OR the act of migrating between wharf towns.
Baff	Large rubber tub used for measuring fish.
Banda	Smokehouse, for drying fish.
Banda-woman	Fish-processor.
Boss-man	The owner of a boat: who may or may not also go to sea as the captain of the boat.
Bonga	The bony, herring-like fish which swim in large shoals through the Yawri Bay.
Bundu	Women's initiation society.
Devil	Nature spirit, occasionally embodied in the form of a masked figure. The word has no particular implications of evil.
Dreg-man	Lowly labourer.
Fetish medicine	Powerful esoteric substances which may be used to harm, heal or protect from danger.
Fetish people	Ritual specialists.
Gbeshe	The person born after twins (who, in common with twins themselves, is usually considered a 'witch').
Ghana-boat	12-15-man fishing vessel.
Kustoment	Respective partners in a long-term trading relationship.
Sim-boat	Onshore dragnet fishing method.
Stranger	Migrant.
Swear	To put a curse on someone (typically the unknown or suspected perpetrator of a crime).
Tross	To loan money, or to sell on credit.
Turn-Turn	To manipulate/charm.
Phone-man	A 'witch-eyed' fisherman able to hear fish moving beneath the water.
Plassas	The leaf-based sauce, eaten with rice and fish.
Plassas Fish	Fish for household consumption, often given as a gift.
Poros	Men's initiation society.
Wap	To give fish away, free, to the people who come and beg on the wharf.
Witch	Person with 'four eyes' who can see, and so move, beyond the superficially visible landscape. The word does not necessarily imply evil.
Yele boat	3-5-man fishing vessel.

Acronyms

EJF	Environmental Justice Foundation
ESRC	Economic and Social Research Council
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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¹ Source: Google Maps, 2013.

² From the English word 'bath', these large rubber tubs — about a metre across and 50cm deep — are the standard measure by which smaller fish are sold on the wharf.

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

JENNIFER DIGGINS

‘SLIPPERY FISH, MATERIAL WORDS:
THE SUBSTANCE OF SUBSISTENCE IN COASTAL SIERRA LEONE’SUMMARY

This thesis is based on eighteen months’ fieldwork in Tissana: a bustling multi-ethnic fishing town on Sierra Leone’s southern coast. It tells the story of the successive waves of young migrants who, for several decades, have been arriving on the coast from rural areas seeking an alternative to the indentured labour conditions of a farming economy still shaped by the legacy of domestic slavery. Set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing post-war economy, and in an ecological context in which fish stocks are in treacherous decline, I explore the intersection between people’s everyday struggles for economic survival and their taken-for-granted knowledge of the substance of the world within which those fragile livelihoods play out.

In a region in which we have come to correlate ‘memory’ with the collective scars of slavery and civil war, Tissana’s older residents look back with nostalgia and remember the youthful energy, conspicuous consumption and seemingly easy ‘freedom’ of their town’s early boom years. In some respects, the pattern is familiar from accounts of resource rushes all across Africa: the convergence of large numbers of young strangers in an unfamiliar landscape far from the authority of village elders opened up a space in which a new kind of moral economy emerged. However, within just a few decades of its initial boom, the fluidity of Sierra Leone’s fishing economy is already under intense pressure. Fish stocks have suffered a noticeable decline and, as catches become smaller and more erratic, people find themselves drawn once more into networks of dependency and reciprocity that offer their only viable hope of material security. A constant tension animating everyday life in Tissana is how people are able to work, through the strategic deployment of material gifts, to nurture the relationships that they rely upon for their subsistence, whilst simultaneously attempting to protect themselves from becoming entangled in other, less appealing social bonds.

At its core, then, this is a work about the materiality of human relationships; of social bonds formed and lived under conditions of such stark economic uncertainty that, very often, ‘love’ and ‘livelihoods’ are difficult to disaggregate — and even more difficult to trust. Here relationships often have a peculiarly fleshy, ethnographically observable aspect. One can go a long way towards mapping the town’s fluctuating networks of friendship, love, debt, and obligation simply by watching the gifts of fish exchanging hands on the wharf.

The town also raises a quite particular set of problems for an anthropologist interested in the materiality of social life. I explore how the lived experience of poverty, and the anxiety of stretched livelihoods are entangled with quotidian discussions of blessings, swears, initiation societies, and ‘fetish’ medicines: elements of social life that we might intuitively gloss as ‘ritual’, but that are, in fact, integral to the everyday economic order. Here, my work builds on a long literature in Sierra Leonean ethnography. Anthropologists working in this region have often revealed how their interlocutors do

not draw any sharp distinction between ‘material’ and ‘immaterial’ elements of the physical environment and the agencies that inhabit it (Ferme 2001; Tonkin 1979; Bellman 1984). My contribution to this literature is to explore how such apparently abstruse questions of im/materiality become relevant in people’s lives through economic practice: through the everyday decisions people make, and the work they invest, in fishing, trading, and gift-exchange.

Chapter 1. Introduction

A slight, softly spoken young man, Tito bore no outward resemblance to the bombastic ‘big man’ of West African cliché (Bayart 1993 [1989]; Strother 2000; Bentor 2008). Yet, as owner of the longest fishing net in Tissana, he was a prominent figure in the local economy. On a day-to-day basis, the crew of Tito’s boat were as likely as any other to return from sea disappointed. Occasionally, though, they succeeded in filling those kilometre-long nets to their capacity and, when they did, the catch would be spectacular enough to generate considerable commotion in town.

Here, Tito is describing one such day. Long before his crew reached land, women up and down Tissana’s two-mile wharf had spotted the silhouette of his boat moving unusually heavily in the water, weighed down with the day’s remarkable catch. By the time the fishermen finally drew back to their landing site, they had met several hundred people there awaiting them expectantly on the shore.

The fish that we gave people passed ten *baffs*² (‘bath-pans’)! More than 500,000 leones [£100], if I had sold them. That’s what we gave away to people. Big fish — fine fish... to the mummies, the girlfriends, the brothers, to all those people who just came and begged, no more — we gave them all. (Tito, boat owner)

Half a million leones is a substantial amount of money in a town like Tissana. At the time of my fieldwork, it would have been enough to buy a small canoe complete with fishing tackle. But Tito was not exaggerating. I had been there on the wharf that morning, as crowds of expectant women waded chest-deep into the sea to press around his boat, and had witnessed when this ‘scramble for fish’ eventually dispersed: tens of dozens of people drifting home, relieved, each wielding a fine fish or two for their household’s cooking pot.

On a less exceptional fishing day, his crew would have been content to have caught even half of the amount of fish that they gave away on that day. Yet, when I asked if Tito ever grew tired of being so relentlessly begged by neighbours and strangers on the wharf, he had seemed rather taken aback by the question:

² From the English word ‘bath’, these large rubber tubs — about a metre across and 50cm deep — are the standard measure by which smaller fish are sold on the wharf.

No! I don't get annoyed! If you do good, you yourself will get. When a person blesses you, tells you: 'Thank you, may God bless', that's how they add [to your wealth]. But if you just hold [your catch] and say 'This is only for me', you never know what you will meet up. This money, we find it now but we don't know how [long] it will last with us.

1.1 Problematic

This thesis sets out to describe the material fabric of daily life on Tissana Wharf: a bustling, though impoverished, fishing town on the shores of Sierra Leone's Yawri Bay. It tells the story of the successive waves of rural migrants who, for several decades now, have been migrating to the Atlantic Coast hoping to find an alternative to a tough agrarian economy still shaped by the legacy of domestic slavery. Wharf towns all along Sierra Leone's coast began to mushroom from the 1960s, as steady streams of rural migrants were drawn by new economic opportunities on the coast. In some respects, the social history of these burgeoning fishing communities echoes that found in accounts of frontier boom towns all across Africa (Mitchell 1956; Boswell 1969; De Boeck 2001; Walsh 2003, 2009). When large numbers of young people converge in an unfamiliar landscape, far from the authority of their erstwhile village elders, a space opens up in which new patterns of moral economy emerge. In a region in which we have come to correlate 'memory' with the collective scars of slavery (Shaw 2002; Ferme 2001) and civil war (McGovern 2012; Bolten 2012), Tissana's older residents look back with nostalgia and remember the youthful energy, conspicuous consumption and seemingly easy 'freedom' of their town's brief boom time years.

Nowadays, however, fish stocks across West Africa are in treacherous decline (EJF 2012) and day-to-day life for many people in Tissana is permeated with a profound sense of material insecurity: that the fragile, unpredictable fishing economy may one day soon fail to meet their most basic livelihood needs. Set against the backdrop of a threadbare post-war state, I trace some of the material strategies adopted by men and women as they struggle to survive at the intersection between a depleted ecology and a social order in which the basic rules of authority, kinship, intimacy, and trust are all perceived to be in a state of flux. What interests me in particular, are the ways in which people's social and economic relationships are shaped by the material – *and immaterial* – fabric of

this maritime world. Within this broad category, I include the physical contours of the coastal topography, as well as the specific substance of fish and other valuable livelihood resources: but I also include the particular social construction of space, value, and materiality. The ethnographic snapshot above allows us to glimpse some of the most distinctive material qualities of life in Tissana, each of which will be developed as a thematic thread through the chapters that follow.

Firstly, what is revealed in the image of dozens of hopeful supplicants pressed around Tito's boat is the visceral material urgency driving people's everyday pursuit of fish on the wharf. In a town where many people are only just managing to survive at the edge of subsistence, many land-based fisherfolk invest an enormous amount of their creative energies, working to build and sustain the webs of social relations (*subabu*) that might enable them to 'catch' fish on land. Secondly, the vignette points to the powerful sense in which maritime space is gendered. Most of my male neighbours led highly mobile lives: migrating easily between the region's various coastal towns, as they traverse Sierra Leone's southern fishing grounds in search of fish. For women, however, time and watery space take on altogether different properties. They may be equally dependent on the ocean and its resources, but for Tissana's women the seascape is an inaccessible space: a horizon across which they watch their partners disappear each morning, and from where, they hope, they will see them return bearing fish.

This juxtaposition of high levels of mobility and the urgent material need for close social networks generates a complex web of social tensions. Even now, many of my informants continue to valorise their maritime world as a space of relative personal 'freedoms', contrasted against a somewhat dystopian vision of their agrarian hinterland, remembered as a space of stifling, kin-based power. So, as fish catches have become smaller and more erratic in recent decades (EJF 2012), many fisherfolk reflect on their growing impoverishment through discourses that emphasise their *moral* ambivalence at being drawn back into binding webs of interpersonal dependency. A tension animating many aspects of everyday life is how, through the strategic deployment of material gifts, people are able to nurture the *subabu* they depend upon for their survival, whilst simultaneously attempting to eschew other, less appealing social entanglements.

At its core, then, this is a thesis about the materiality of human relationships: of social bonds formed and lived under conditions of such stark economic uncertainty that, very

often, ‘love’ and ‘livelihoods’ are difficult to disaggregate — and even more difficult to trust. Relationships in Tissana often have a peculiarly fleshy, ethnographically observable aspect: one can go a long way towards mapping the town’s fluctuating networks of love, friendship, debt and obligation simply by watching the flows of fish and rice weaving their shifting patterns through Tissana’s social fabric. However, this region of West Africa also raises a particular set of problems for any ethnographer interested in the materiality of economic life.

Across the Upper Guinea Coast, a rich ethnographic literature attests to the importance of strategies of ‘secrecy’ at every level of social and political life (Ferme 2001; Bellman 1981, 1984; Murphy 1998; Shaw 2002). In the maritime economy, this diffuse regional aesthetic of secrecy intersects with a coastal topography that provides ample opportunity for people to move in and out view, across the watery horizon. Within the contours of this physical and economic landscape, Sierra Leone’s famed ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ (Ferme 2001) finds palpable expression, and a weight of material urgency, in everyday gendered transactions of fishing, gift-exchange and relatedness.

As a related but quite separate point, ethnographers in this region of West Africa have often emphasised the fact that their informants do not recognise any sharp distinction between ‘material’ and ‘spiritual’ elements of their lived environment. This interweaving of material substances with immaterial agencies has been discussed, both for its intrinsic interest as one facet of a complex regional cosmology (e.g. Jędrej 1974, 1976; MacGaffey 1988; Tonkin 2000); and also for the ways in which it supports a regional model of charismatic power (Ferme 2001; Strother 2000). However, these constructions of im/materiality have rarely been contemplated through the anthropological lens usually most strongly associated with material things: that is, exchange. As an economic anthropologist in Tissana, I had to learn afresh what kinds of substances were materially capable of holding value, and how a person might reasonably seek to form relationships or exert their agency through material things. The blessings Tito accepted in exchange for his precious fish encapsulate this problematic. Despite their communication through so seemingly ephemeral a medium as speech, the people I knew in Tissana insisted that blessings carry a weight of value far beyond that of ‘mere’ expressions of gratitude or goodwill. Indeed (as I discuss in Chapter 7), fisherfolk describe spoken blessings, and exchange them, as though they were a material element of the economy.

But why does it really matter if a blessing is treated as materially valuable, just as fish are? Most importantly, in an economy as tight as Tissana's, this surprising valuation has powerful consequences for people's livelihoods. It enables somebody with nothing to survive. By adopting an economic perspective, grounded in a detailed description of people's everyday livelihood strategies, we can begin to see how seemingly esoteric realms of knowledge — about the relationship between 'agencies, and their material forms' (Ferme 2001: 4) — become *relevant* in people's lives through their economic practices: through the decisions they make about how to invest their meagre resources, in fishing, trading and building relationships.

1.1.1 *Structure of this Chapter*

I begin my literature review (in **Section 1.2**) by introducing some of the key themes that emerge through existing accounts of Sierra Leone's rural moral economy. Almost no research has been published on Sierra Leone's vibrant commercial maritime world:³ our ethnographic knowledge of peacetime life on the Upper Guinea Coast is dominated by studies of small-scale hunter-farmer forest villages. Yet, in other respects, my focus on the mundane contestations of economic life places this thesis within a well-established genre of regional ethnography. Some of the richest work to emerge from Sierra Leone in the pre-war period had been concerned with exploring the everyday material tensions that ran half-hidden through agrarian households and villages (Richards 1986; Ferme 2001; Leach 1994). There is a long intellectual precedent, too, to my own interest in the ways people conceptualise and 'use' wealth, with ethnographers of Sierra Leone often describing the wealth of 'big' people measured in terms of their mastery of valuable 'secret' knowledge, and their ability to protect, provide for and patronise a large number of dependants (d'Azevedo 1962b; Ferme 2001; Murphy 1980).

The autopsy of Sierra Leone's civil war revealed a seam of resentment amongst dependent farmers, the depth of which appears to have been underestimated in earlier ethnographic accounts. In **Section 1.3**, I spend a few pages contemplating where 'morality' resides in the economic order. My suggestion is that people's intuitive sense of what is permissible or possible in economic life is, for the most part, taken for

³ Carol MacCormack's (1982) household survey of Katta village, conducted in the late-1970s, is one exception.

granted. The ‘morality’ of economic behaviour is most likely to become the subject of explicit public reflection, available to ethnographic observation, at moments of important social rupture. Civil war is an extreme example; a far more common situation in which we might expect the ‘morality’ of economic life to become a common matter of public debate is when people find themselves navigating through a period of important change, when the rules of material relationships are no longer clear. This is the situation my informants found themselves in. One of the core propositions running through this thesis is that the anxieties that preoccupy people in Tissana often gain their particular salience through the juxtaposition against the agricultural hinterland that many left behind when they decided to relocate to the sea.

It could be tempting to summarise Tissana’s economic history as a series of familiar trajectories: between relative degrees of impoverishment or precarity; from more ‘socially embedded’ to more ‘market-based’ modes of organising economic life, and then the inverse. Although these shorthand categories do capture many important aspects of people’s shifting economic experience, they overlook the most interesting distinctive qualities of social transformation on this coast. Most of Tissana’s residents have lived through a period in which the material substance of landscape they inhabit and the resources they depend upon for their survival have changed. In **Section 1.4**, I contemplate how certain well-known characteristics of Sierra Leonean agrarian culture have either been undermined or taken on new forms within the Yawri Bay’s watery topography, to shape the unique contours of Tissana’s moral, social and economic life. I end, in **Section 1.5**, by returning to reflect in a more general way on how people’s pragmatic judgements of exchange value may offer a window into their taken-for-granted knowledge of the material order.

1.2 The Moral Economy of Rural Sierra Leone

Rice farming across the forested regions of the Upper Guinea Coast is labour-intensive. Land itself is rarely in short supply and, in principle at least, anyone who begs permission from the head of a landholding lineage can expect to be granted access to an area of land to cultivate. Far more challenging is mobilising the labour required to clear the densely foliated land and coax a harvest from its unforgiving soils. Against this ecological context, a constant preoccupation for the head of any farming household is

how to cultivate relationships of dependency, through marriage, fostering, moneylending and other forms of patronage (Leach 1994), with people who will then be obliged to provide labour on their farm. The flip side of this relationship is that for most people in farming communities, their identity, safety and well-being — even their most basic food security — are all contingent upon being able to rely on the protection of some more powerful patron (d’Azevedo 1962a; Richards 1986; Booth *et al.* 1999).

It is difficult to understand the resonance of these power relations without some sense of a not so distant history in which domestic ‘slavery’ (*wono*) had been one of the region’s most important institutions (Little 1967 [1951]; Ferme 2001; d’Azevedo 1962b; Murphy 1980). Estimates vary but by some reckonings as many as three-quarters of the population of the Upper Guinea Coast had been ‘slaves’ in the early part of the 19th century (Holsoe 1977: 294). They ‘provided the basis, in fact, of the social system, and upon their labours as domestics depended, very largely, whatever agricultural culture [Sierra Leone] possessed’ (Little 1967 [1951]: 37).

In 1928, domestic slavery was outlawed by the colonial regime: although then (as now) it was not immediately clear to the British administrators what exactly it meant to be a ‘slave’ in Sierra Leone. Certainly the institution bore little resemblance to shackle-and-chains models of slavery familiar from colonial plantation economies (Rodney 1970; Hair 1971; MacCormack 1977b). Precolonial European visitors knew very well that it was common for people to be bought, captured or tricked into dependency, but they often had difficulties distinguishing these individuals from their ‘free’ neighbours by any visible measure of material wealth or lifestyle (Kopytoff and Miers 1977: 5). In a region in which social personhood is typically described as *depending* upon ‘belonging’ to a group ‘in the double sense of the word in English — that is, they are members of the group and also part of its wealth, to be disposed of in its best interests’ (*ibid.*: 9) — to be owned as a ‘slave’ was to occupy one position, albeit a particularly powerless and stigmatised one, within a social structure in which *all* persons were ‘owned’. So, for example, migrants would sometimes voluntarily place themselves in positions of absolute dependency very similar to that of a ‘slave’ after fleeing their home following war or a personal dispute (*ibid.*).

Over ninety years have passed since slavery officially became illegal in Sierra Leone, but the legacy of these historical power structures continues to be strongly felt in rural areas

today. It remains the case, for example, that the most powerful individuals in any village are invariably those able to demonstrate the longest genealogical roots in the land. More vulnerable people, the ones most likely to end up working as labourers on another person's farm, typically trace their descent from people who arrived in the village more recently, as client strangers or captured slaves (Murphy 1980; d'Azevedo 1962a; Sarró 2010; Berliner 2010).

Behind this apparently simple model of inherited power, commentators have repeatedly emphasised the subtlety of the ways in which people attempt to manipulate the labour of their weaker neighbours (Murphy 1980; d'Azevedo 1962a; Ferme 2001). So, whilst a person's high status is typically legitimised in terms of their direct descent from the village's original founding figure, it is apparently fairly common (or had been in the 1960s at least) for elders to reinvent the public version of descent accounts to more closely mirror the lived reality of village politics, extending the ancestral roots of successful people deeper into their village's genealogical history (d'Azevedo 1962b: 510). Meanwhile, Caroline Bledsoe (1990a, 1990b, 1995), Mariane Ferme (2001) and Melissa Leach (1994) all emphasised the range of covert strategies that enabled women (in particular) to manoeuvre successfully through this economic environment, even from a position of apparent weakness. Taken together, this body of literature produced a highly nuanced image of how men and women in hunter-farmer villages worked to navigate a complex web of overt and covert relationships in order to balance fragile livelihoods in an unpredictable ecology.

Until the 1990s, then, ethnographers had tended to emphasise that, for all the evident stratification of village-level economics, 'differentials [of wealth] are fluid, even reversible' (Leach 1994: 185; cf. Richards 1986; Booth *et al.* 1999). It is only now, viewed retrospectively through the dark lens of civil war, that the patronage system has come to be viewed by many with a heightened misgiving, as a key source of the frustrations that had eventually erupted so destructively in rural communities (Richards 2004, 2005; Murphy 2010; Knörr and Filho 2010; Peters 2010).

Over the past two decades, the majority of research into Sierra Leone's economic life has been preoccupied with making sense of the violence that ravaged the country throughout the 1990s. The conflict had initially perplexed outside observers: Sierra Leone was not divided by any obvious ethnic or religious tensions; nor had combatants

seemed able to articulate any coherent political motives for fighting. In any case, the violence was far more often directed against civilians than enemy soldiers. Nothing about this war made sense within traditional models of war-as-nation-state-politics. Then, towards the end of the 1990s, a new theoretical framework came to the fore, which appeared to render the conflict legible to Western observers: the violence, we were told, was driven not by political grievance but by the simple logic of economic ‘greed’ (cf. Collier 2000).

Starting from the common observation that all factions relied heavily on cash from the sale of alluvial diamonds, many commentators reasoned that the war had been, at heart, *about* diamond wealth (Douglas 1999; Gberie *et al.* 2000; Malaquias 2001); that everyone, from warlords to impoverished young fighters, had been drawn into the conflict by the promise that fortunes were to be made on the violent fringes of an illicit global trade. This explanation resonated powerfully in the international media where, alongside emotive images of amputees and Kalashnikov-toting children, ‘blood diamonds’ have come to be seen as one of the key icons of the Sierra Leone war. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Diggins 2008), one interesting thing about the resonance of this ‘blood diamond’ narrative for Euro-American audiences is that it located the underlying driving force of an African war in precisely the set of characteristics (rationality, individualism, acquisitiveness) that are usually taken to epitomise our economic lives — reflecting a deeply conflicted attitude towards capitalist ‘greed’ that has been a recurrent theme in the history of European discourse for at least the past few centuries (Bloch and Parry 1989; Sahlins 1996; Mintz 1993).

If this ‘blood diamond’ discourse can be read as a bleak meditation on the corrupting potential of incorporation into the global capitalist order, anthropologists with a more specific ethnographic knowledge of the region responded by drawing renewed attention to the fissures inherent in ‘traditional’ economic life. When anthropologists began listening to the accounts of ex-combatants, the narratives they heard consistently painted a much more brutal image of village life than we were used to seeing. Again and again, young men claimed that they had been driven from their villages — and into one or other of the rebel factions — because they were routinely exploited by their wealthier neighbours, who abused customary law in what essentially amounted to patterns of indentured labour (Richards 2005, 2004; Peters and Richards 1998; Peters 2010; Humphreys and Weinstein 2004, 2006). In place of an earlier interest in the

contingency and mutability of patron-client relationships, post-war ethnographers are much more likely to emphasise the brutal inequities of village life. Our newly dominant image of agrarian life in Sierra Leone is summarised neatly here, by Paul Richards: ‘The more docile among the descendants of the former farm slaves continue to work the land for subsistence returns. Others, less willing to queue in line for increasingly uncertain patrimonial scraps, default on their fines, are hounded into vagrancy and end up as protagonists of war’ (2005: 585).

This thesis is strongly informed by Paul Richards’ post-war work and that of others working in a similar vein, whose insights often echo the accounts of my own informants. What we do need to be careful of, however, is sliding towards teleological narratives of how Sierra Leone’s history of slavery led, inevitably, to a violent modern war (Jackson 2005). The danger is that we arrive at an image of peacetime life as inherently — inevitably — pathological (see Reno 2003: 156). An ethnography of Sierra Leone’s maritime economy provides an interesting counterpoint to the post-war discourse: because, in fact, not every young man who found village life intolerable joined one or other of the military factions. Some moved to the city, or sought a new livelihood in the oases of youth that grew up in the diamond-mining and gold-mining regions throughout the colonial era (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962). Others became fishermen instead.

There is one final point I want to emphasise about these two opposing explanations of Sierra Leone’s civil war. Whether the violence is understood as a grass roots ‘slave revolt’ (Richards 2005: 580) or as the tragic by-product of a global greed for ‘blood diamonds’ (Gberie *et al.* 2000), what is striking is that both narratives locate the root cause of the country’s terrible implosion in the catastrophic moral failure of one or other economic system. So, whilst the debate is rarely framed explicitly in these terms, these two arguments represent two quite different standpoints on a broader debate that has preoccupied social anthropologists for decades, and that is also a major concern of this thesis: *what is the relationship between ‘economics’ and ‘morality’?*

1.3 The Intersection of Economies and Moralities

The past fifty years have been a period of dramatic social and economic upheaval along Sierra Leone's southern coast, as settlements like Tissana were transformed from subsistence hamlets to busy hubs of commercial fishing, fish-processing and trade. Elsewhere across the postcolonial world, a rich ethnographic literature attests to the fact that members of recently subsistence economies often respond with deep moral ambivalence in the face of newly introduced market-based systems of reckoning value and mobilising labour (Bohannon 1959; Ong 1988; Burkhalter and Murphy 1989; Hutchinson 1992). Historically, this unease was often interpreted by anthropologists as a 'natural' response to the moral vacuity of market relations (Taussig 1980; Luetchford 2012). However, more recent ethnography emphasises that market systems are in fact infused with, and shaped by, moral discourse (e.g. Browne 2009; Otto and Willerslev 2013; Dolan and Rajak 2011). As I discuss in this section, my own ethnography led me to wonder whether in fact *any* significant shift in the rules governing economic life might trigger an amplification in moral disquiet about the 'ethics' underlying material exchange.

The complexity of the interrelationship between cosmologies and economies has been a recurrent preoccupation in European social science since at least the 19th century. Max Weber (2001 [1930]) is often credited as the first important theorist to acknowledge that religious beliefs not only reflect but also help *produce* people's economic behaviours. In his best-known study, he explored how the Protestant Reformation had set in motion a series of profound changes in the character of economic life across Northern Europe.⁴ His argument can be read, at least in part, as a move to counterbalance Marx's (2000 [1946]) claim that popular beliefs are all ultimately shaped by human activity to reproduce the economic order and naturalise its inequalities. Over the subsequent years, ethnographers and historians have repeatedly arrived, by various routes, at the same discovery: 'While it may not matter much which came first, economies or culture, it is important to keep the interconnection in mind, for changing one often changes the

⁴ Put simply, Weber argued that because Calvinists believed material success could be read as evidence of God's grace, diligent hard work came to be valorised as a direct expression of piety. Many of the qualities we now consider characteristic of secular capitalism — individualism, rationalisation, the calculation of profit — could all, he argued, be traced back to a shift in values originally conceived of as theological.

other' (Blim 2012: 345). Comaroff and Comaroff (1985) illustrated, for example, that the 'conversion' Protestant missionaries were attempting to precipitate in colonial South Africa reached far beyond conveying the theological teachings of the Bible. The missionaries' efforts to disseminate their 'Protestant world view' led them to intervene in every material aspect of Tswana life, attempting to radically reconfigure Tswana attitudes on everything from labour, to time, space and the self.

Over the past couple of decades, however, Africanist ethnographers have tended to be less interested in how people's knowledge of the cosmological order *shapes* their economic behaviour, than to explore how that knowledge can be read as a moral commentary directed *against* economic circumstances. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the dominant framework for analysing a wide swathe of frightening narratives, on everything from zombie-labour, to vampires, witchcraft and medicine murder, had been to read them as an expression of 'moral panic', railing against the injustices of 'modern' forms of wealth and inequality⁵ (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Meyer 1995; Geschiere 1992; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; Shaw 1997b, 1997a).

One does not have to look far to find examples of ethnographers employing a similar analytic in Sierra Leone, interpreting their interlocutors' fears of occult violence as an expression of their negative experience of incorporation into the global economic order. 'The basic story is', as Rosalind Shaw put it, 'nearly everywhere the same' (1997b: 191). Her own work includes accounts of Temne witches inhabiting a high-tech global metropolis, in which the stolen souls of Sierra Leonean victims toil for their lavishly wealthy witch-masters (2002). Similarly, Paul Richards once argued that, for Mende rice farmers, market trade stood so radically at odds with their moral norms that the widespread fear that power-hungry individuals are able to seize wealth through the magical consumption of vulnerable members of society could be paraphrased as a 'discourse of farming versus trade' (1996: 147).

It is difficult to overstate the importance of this 'occult economy' literature when it first came to the fore of Africanist ethnography in the 1990s. It was a powerful realisation when ethnographers began to recognise that discourses and practices once considered

⁵ There are clear traces here of Michael Taussig's (1980) seminal work on *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism*, amongst newly proletarianised plantation workers in Colombia. Although the explicitly Marxian tone of Taussig's analysis has faded in more recent scholarship, his influence continues to be powerfully felt in almost every contemporary discussion of 'occult economies'.

relics of a ‘traditional’ precolonial past were thriving and actively proliferating under the conditions of ‘modernity’. Careful archival research by Africanist historians such as David Pratten (2007) and Louise White (2000), chronicling the circulation of vampire and cannibal stories throughout the colonial period, appear to confirm what many ethnographers had felt by intuition: that violent narratives of the ‘occult’ are most likely to flare up in moments of socio-economic change, and to be told in patterns that map society’s shifting social and political tensions.

In recent years, some commentators have begun to criticise this trope, for reproducing familiar moral binaries in ways that risk obscuring the moral complexity of people’s economic experience. Todd Sanders has reflected, for example, on whether part of the attraction of this trope is that it enables ethnographers to express their own nostalgia for the lost morality of pre-capitalist economies, economies that many of us remain apt to romanticise as *inherently* more ‘humane’ than market-based ones (2003, 2008; cf. Sumich 2010).

Reflecting on processes of economic transformation across the colonial and postcolonial world, ethnographers have often returned to the classic sociological literature on Europe’s own brutal transition to capitalism during the Industrial Revolution. For all the important differences between them, one thing that Polanyi (1944), Marx (2000 [1946]) and Simmel (1978 [1900]) had agreed upon was that the adoption of markets regulated by monetary value had a profoundly corrosive effect on social bonds. Whereas previously, the acts of giving and receiving had served to bind people together into ongoing reciprocal relationships, the anonymous character of money made it possible for people to exchange things without ever becoming socially or morally entangled with one another. ‘One of the most shatteringly simple ideas of all time’, Paul Bohannan once famously wrote, ‘[money] creates its own revolution’ (1959: 503). In his work in Nigeria, Bohannan described how the introduction of colonial currency eroded the moral bedrock of Tiv society: by making it possible to weight the value of a wife against that of a farm tool, cash effectively dissolved the distinctions between ‘spheres of exchange’ that had, until that time, been kept entirely separate (ibid).

Over the past couple of decades, these polarised models of economic life have been challenged from a number of different directions. Firstly, following Bloch and Parry’s (1989) important edited volume, it is nowadays well recognised that people around the

world appropriate, represent and use money in a whole range of different ways. Ethnographers elsewhere in West Africa have stressed that — far from going hand in hand with ‘individualism’, as Western models tend to assume — the circulation of cash is inseparable from the production of social relations. In rural Ghana, for example, Sjaak van der Geest found, ‘money does not sever relations, it binds people together’ (1997: 450). Important relationships that would, at one time, have been maintained by other forms of gift-exchange are nowadays linked with the flux of money, making cash an indispensable means of realising reciprocity (cf. Cornwall 2002; Barber 1995; Hasty 2005). His observations could be taken as one illustration of Appadurai’s (1986) more general argument, that *all* ‘things’ are capable of acquiring quite different social meanings as they circulate from one context to another, often shifting from an anonymous commodity to a highly personal gift, and back again.

Meanwhile, there is a growing literature illustrating that even the most archetypically capitalist institutions have a profoundly moral core, and not only in the sense that commercial supply chains (Tsing 2013) and industrial labour regimes (Sanchez 2012; Rajak 2011) often depend upon personalised relationships of the kind we tend to associate with ‘gift’ economies. The more important point to note in the context of my own ethnography is that the very concept of ‘free market’ trade can, in certain circumstances, become an *ideological* aspiration (Otto and Willerslev 2013: 15), typically entangled with ideals about individual freedom, personal expression, and the potential (at least) for social mobility (Browne 2009; Carrier 1997). Whatever we might think of the real-world consequences of economic liberalism, its ideological potential is visible in many contemporary development initiatives, for example, which aim to ‘empower’ poor people through credit-lending projects in which ‘adapting to the market has been presented as an ethical imperative’ (Elyachar 2005: 9; cf. Dolan and Scott 2009).

One difficulty with studying the ‘morality’ of economic life is that, for most people most of the time, morality is essentially indistinguishable from custom or habit (d’Andrade 1995; Howell 1997). Zigon has argued that it is only when people come up against some kind of social rupture that they become tangibly aware of having to negotiate right from wrong; and that it is in these crises, as ‘persons or groups of persons are forced to step away from their unreflective everydayness and think through, figure out, work on themselves and respond to certain ethical dilemmas, troubles or problems’, that moral

reasoning becomes an active social process, open to ethnographic study (Zigon 2007: 140).

As we have already seen, civil war — and the sense making that follows it — is one context in previously unquestioned aspects of economic life might become the focus of widespread moral commentary. Another, less brutal situation in which moral rupture is likely to become a common feature of daily life is when people find themselves navigating through a period of dramatic social change. It is no coincidence, for example, that the very term ‘moral economy’ was first coined by the social historian E.P. Thompson (1971) to describe one such moment of rupture: this time in 18th-century England, at a time when rural economies had been shifting away from older paternalist models of food marketing, towards a newly capitalist order in which landlords were absolved of their responsibility to protect their tenants in times of dearth. Whilst Thompson is most often cited for his analysis of the market as ‘heartless’ and ‘disinfested of intrusive moral imperatives’ (1971: 89-90), the more general point worth stressing is that the protections that peasants had once taken for granted only became the subject of an active moral discourse (in this case, in the form of food riots) at the moment when they were stripped away (Thompson 1991; Edelman 2012).

Over a century later, and facing the demise of the 20th-century welfare system, Andrea Muehlebach made a similar observation: ‘Many of Europe’s most famous public intellectuals...[are] engaged in their own acts of grieving; a grieving quite ambivalent in that it is directed toward an object *never quite loved*’ (Muehlebach 2012: 6, my emphasis). In both cases, what is striking is that it is the experience of living through a moment of important economic *change* that instilled in people a heightened sense of the moral complexity of their economic lives. As Joel Robbins described of his fieldwork with the Urapmim, a Papua New Guinean society recently converted to Pentecostal Christianity, ‘For those caught living between a traditional cultural system and one they have newly adopted, morality is likely to provide the window through which they can see the contradictions with which they have to live’ (2004: 14).

With this in mind, and given that ethnographers have so often worked in societies freshly reeling from their exposure to the hegemonic forces of global capital, it is not terribly surprising that the anthropological literature on economic change should be particularly rich in examples of people responding with moral unease to the unfamiliar

logic of wage labour and colonial currency. It is in these liminal spaces of social history, where people find themselves consciously working to reconcile their experience of participating in two quite different socio-economic systems, that the everyday economic order is most likely to become the site of active moral reflection. What we ought to be careful of, however, is sliding from this important *methodological* point towards a more generalising set of assumptions about what *kinds* of economic change are likely to disrupt people's sense of natural morality, and why.

My own ethnography points to a quite different history of economic change, and of the moral anxieties it stimulates. As I have already begun to suggest, the strongest motive farmers cited for leaving home to seek a new life on the sea is that commercial fishing appeared to offer an escape from a long-resented 'traditional' rural economy of bondship and pawnship. By the time of my fieldwork in 2010-11, Tissana's commercial heyday was already a memory. With fish stocks in noticeable decline, my neighbours reflected upon their creeping material impoverishment through a discourse that emphasised the changing character of their personal relationships. According to popular perception, 'free' economic transactions are being encroached upon once more by sticky bonds of debt and social obligation.

However, such grand linear trajectories (from more or less 'market-based' to more or less 'socially embedded') will always obscure the real complexities of economic history. In the following section I contemplate how the material form of the Yawri Bay's topography and its resources has intersected with the historical fabric of Sierra Leonean cultural life, to help shape the unique contours of Tissana's moral, social and economic life.

1.4 The Material Form of the Landscape and its Resources

We are emerging from a long period during which postmodern approaches have dominated the social sciences. The trend has been to emphasise the power of discourse, and to shy away from any description of material experience that could be construed as being naively representational. In recent years, however, a growing number of writers

have been working to explicitly redress that balance: emphasising that our insights into other people's lives are seriously impoverished if we fail to fully acknowledge the extent to which they are shaped by the material *substance* and physical spaces of the worlds they inhabit (Coole and Frost 2010; Ingold 2007; Harvey 2006).

Within Africanist ethnography, a good example of this broad resurgence of interest in the material 'stuff' of economic life can be found in the work of Maxim Bolt. His ethnography, set in a farm workers' settlement on the Zimbabwean-South African border, examines how the substance of cash becomes relevant within the particular landscape of a border work camp. In a world 'characterised by transience and a conspicuously absent police force, money's *form* matters. Cash is a burden' (Bolt 2012: 2, original emphasis). Bolt demonstrates that his interlocutors were motivated to spend their wages fast, and subsist for the rest of the month on credit — not because of any cultural associations with cash as inherently 'hot' (Walsh 2003; Wilk 2007) or 'polluting' (Werthmann 2003; Shipton 1989), as has sometimes been claimed in frontier towns elsewhere in Africa — but rather because, living in dorms and often surrounded by strangers, the most likely alternative is to be robbed. In any economic world, there will always be important social repercussions arising from the fact that the things we consider valuable and want to possess have particular material properties. However, as Bolt's study recognises, the 'materiality' of social life is not limited merely to the things we exchange and consume. 'As human beings... we live our lives surrounded by, immersed in, matter' (Coole and Frost 2010: 1) and fully acknowledging this fact means exploring how our economic relationships play out within the physical contours of a particular topography.

One cannot live long amongst fisherfolk without developing an acute awareness that, as Acheson puts it here, 'marine adaptations are one of the most extreme achieved by man' (1981: 277). In a context such as coastal Sierra Leone, where rainy season storms are ferocious, and navigation technology rudimentary, the force and danger of the ocean are rarely far from people's minds. Indeed, it is striking that many aspects of the Yawri Bay's commercial fishing economy have developed, in a relatively short space of time, to mirror those described in commercial fisheries elsewhere. From the fluid migration patterns (Acheson 1981; Jorion 1988; Marquette *et al.* 2002), the deliberate valorisation of 'living in the moment' (Astuti 1999), to the highly charged gendered relationships (Allison and Janet 2001; Béné 2007; Westaway *et al.* 2007; Seeley 2009), and the widespread air of competition and mistrust (Andersen 1980; Beuving 2010;

McGregor 2008) — I repeatedly came across examples of how life in Tissana appeared to conform to the global stereotypes of fishing life. Each of these characteristics will be fleshed out in detail in the ethnographic chapters of this thesis, but I spend a few pages here, briefly contextualising these social changes within their regional ethnographic setting.

1.4.1 *History and Space*

Around the world, most coastal communities regard the ocean as too wild a space to be divided up to be claimed — or indeed inherited — as private property. As we will see in **Chapter 6**, this often leads to intense competition between rival fishermen, all of whom are able to make an equally legitimate claim on the same ‘commons’ resource (Andersen 1980; Schoembucher 1988; Beuving 2010). A further consequence of fluid ‘commons’ wealth is that it effectively undermines the relevance of ancestral history as a source of social privilege.

As mentioned above, almost all classic ethnographic literature on the Upper Guinea region is concerned with describing hunter-farmer forest villages. In agrarian communities of this kind, the most eagerly sought-after resources fall into two broad categories. Firstly, a person’s relationships to living and dead members of the landholding lineages determines whether they will be able to claim a ‘natural’ right to farm the land (MacCormack 1986). Secondly are the resources that enable farming households to coax a successful harvest from that unforgiving forest landscape: plenty of hard human labour, and the esoteric knowledge to enable the land’s capricious productive forces (cf. Ferme 2001). The value placed on these particular resources helps reproduce a pattern of social hierarchy and cosmological power that is literally grounded into the land and its history. In Sherbro farming communities in the 1970s and 80s, for example, MacCormack (1986) described how ancestors and ancestresses of village-founding lineages were considered to inhabit the contemporary landscape, and were revered as the ultimate source of good and bad fortune. The implication had been an apparently direct correlation between the depths of a person’s historical roots in the land, the depths of their legitimate knowledge of the forces of nature concealed within it, and their ability to claim moral and material authority over other members of their community. So, although it was recognised that even a poor stranger could potentially become a powerful patron, such a radical reversal in status was only conceivable

through the ‘strategic, *though illicit*, exploitation of secret knowledge of the landscape’ (Ferme 2001: 2, my emphasis).

For those migrants who chose to leave their farming villages behind to pursue livelihoods as fisherfolk, uprooted from the land, there have been far-reaching repercussions. Even for the minority of people whose ancestors had inhabited this coastline for several generations, Tissana’s transformation from a subsistence fisher-farming village to a commercial fishing town entailed a radical reorientation away from value rooted in the productive forces of the land and its history. Reliant instead upon a slippery and highly mobile underwater quarry, members of Sierra Leone’s burgeoning commercial fishing economy have learned to develop new, quite different modes of negotiating social belonging and economic power: not only between ‘landlords’ and their tenants (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962; McGovern 2012), but also more broadly across a shifting fabric of households (Chapter 5), boats (Chapter 3) and business partnerships (Chapter 4).

1.4.2 *Gender, Concealment and Space*

Perhaps the single most striking way in which the physical topography of the Kagboro Coast shapes how people are able to negotiate their social relationships is that men and women are empowered to move in quite different ways through the maritime space. Tissana’s seagoing fishermen lead highly mobile lives, pursuing their quarry across the Yawri Bay. If they judge that it may increase their chances of landing a good catch, boat captains often choose to base their boat, and land their fish, on a rival wharf for a period of days or weeks. As wharf towns all around the shores of these fishing grounds have burgeoned over the past few decades, the bay itself has become an increasingly congested — though unequivocally *male* — space, in which rival crews actively compete against one another to hunt the same limited, elusive shoals of fish. For Tissana’s women, reliant upon the success of their male business partners at sea, yet unable to venture out to sea themselves, the oceanscape is regarded through a field of half-trust and uncertainty (see Chapter 6).

This emphasis on the hiddenness of gendered agency connects into one of the strongest recurrent themes in Sierra Leonean ethnography. Gendered initiation societies play a central role in customary politics, and have been capturing the imagination of European

visitors for at least the past two hundred years (Winterbottom 1803; Aldridge 1894). Although often described in English as ‘secret societies’, the label does not refer to a society whose *membership* is secret. On the contrary, almost all men are joined into the lower echelons of the Poro, whilst practically every woman is a member of the Bundu. Rather, the institutions’ ‘secrecy’ resides in the powerful esoteric ‘medicines’ (*ifohn*) that form the core of each sodality’s identity.

At one time, young people of all genders would have spent several months or years secluded in their respective societies’ ‘bush’: a sacred space carefully segregated beyond the limits of the public villagescape. During this period of separation, children were transformed into fully gendered adults, passing through a series of physical ordeals and bodily transformations as well as receiving gender-specific instruction on life skills ranging from farming to military tactics, childbirth, and the confection of their society’s most common *ifohn*. Much of the research focusing directly on initiation societies has been concerned with exploring the relationship between secrecy and power. For, even whilst imparting some basic knowledge to initiates, it was the elders’ mastery of other, more powerful, esoteric knowledge that imbued them with the charisma to exercise almost indisputable authority over junior members (Little 1966; Murphy 1980; Bledsoe 1984). Already, by the 1940s, Kenneth Little was describing the Poro as an institution in decline: its importance undermined by the introduction of colonial forms of education and political authority (Little 1948: 8). And yet, six decades on, sodalities show no sign of disappearing from Sierra Leone’s political landscape. The picture in Tissana, for example, was mixed. Nowadays, Poro initiation is a simple, day-long ceremony and most of the men I knew were keen to stress that the society held little coercive power in their lives anymore. The Bundu society had experienced no such decline, and continues to play a central — celebrated — role in women’s everyday social lives.

In the 1970s and early 80s, societies drew considerable attention from feminist anthropologists in part, because of the evident political power wielded by female society leaders (MacCormack 1984; 2000). What seemed even more resonant at the time was that the process of initiation appeared to encapsulate the central argument being made in anthropological theorisations of gender: that gendered difference is not biologically given, but rather socially produced (MacCormack 1977, 1980; Bledsoe 1984; Lamp 1985). So, for example, in her fieldwork amongst Sherbro speakers in the 1970s, Carol MacCormack (1980) emphasised that Sherbro men and women were both active in

what we might gloss as ‘public’ and ‘private’ spheres of social life. Both laboured on the farm, engaged in commercial trade, contributed to training children, and invested considerable creative energy nurturing networks of social relations. Sherbro speakers *did* express a strong and explicit ideology of gendered difference: but central to this ideology was the knowledge that gendered difference had to be actively *produced* through rites of spatial separation, cultural training, and bodily transformation. Far from viewing pregnancy and birth as an inevitable function of their female bodies, Bundu women ‘with their secret knowledge, public laws, legitimate sanctions, and hierarchical organisation, bring women’s biology under the most careful cultural control’ (MacCormack 1977: 94).

What made this even more interesting was that, aside from the two core homosocial societies, a minority of young Sherbro speakers are initiated into a third sodality — the Thoma — in which girls and boys are initiated together, in mixed-sex pairs, referred to, for the purposes of initiation only, as ‘husband and wife’. Here, MacCormack describes the dramatic moment in which formerly ‘protosocial’ children were reborn as gendered adults, following months of separation in the Thoma society grove:

Their marginalization is as death. As their period of instruction to new social roles nears its conclusion, the members of the Thoma beat on the ‘belly’ of the forest spirit (beat on the buttress roots of the cotton tree or an up-turned canoe), announcing its labour has begun. Young trees in the grove are shaken, and people on the outside ‘hear’ the pains and ‘see’ the *min* [the Thoma spirit] thrashing about in labour. The sounds of the long double-headed Thoma drum and women’s chanting voices are also heard. The chant ends in a drawn-out ‘uh wheeeee’, of labour pain, followed by silence. Then the drumming, chanting, and terminal ‘uh wheeee’ are repeated, in the rhythm of labour contraction followed by rest. (1980: 106)

Although the Thoma has always been, and remains, far rarer than the homosocial sodalities, its existence serves as a vivid reminder of the complex ways in which gendered difference is constructed in this region. In various contexts, Bundu symbolism also emphasises the mingling and integration of male and female elements, rather than their simple separation⁶ (Bledsoe 1984; Lamp 1985). As in other Sierra Leonean language

⁶ In Tissana, both boys’ and girls’ period of ritual seclusion was punctuated by key moments in which neophytes paraded publicly through town dressed in the clothes of members of the opposite sex.

groups⁷ (cf. Ferme 2001), a small number of exceptional Sherbro women, particularly female chiefs, are permitted to join the Poro society, and to enter its sacred grove. Such a move carries considerable prestige, but it also comes at a cost: after initiation into Poro, a woman will never be able to bear children again. These observations lead Caroline Bledsoe to argue that ‘Poro and Sande [Bundu] ideology casts the boundaries and the middle realm of contact between the sexes as highly charged and potentially dangerous’ (1984: 465). As such, if we focus too intently on the initiation period during which young men and women are ritually segregated, then we overlook ‘the significance of the fact that this separation prepares women to mingle with men’ (ibid: 463).

Plenty of ethnographers before me have suggested that the aesthetic of secrecy, so clearly epitomised by the high fences and esoteric practices of the region’s sodalities, also finds expression across a whole range of more ‘banal’ contexts (Bellman 1981; d’Azevedo 1962b; Ferme 2001; Gable 1997; Murphy 1998; Piot 1993). One thing that is striking about the commercial fishing economy is that ‘men’s space’ has come to be segregated ‘women’s space’ in additional, quite different ways, with profound repercussions for the ways in which people of both genders are able to manage their social and economic lives. In the maritime context, Sierra Leone’s famed ‘hermeneutic of concealment’ (Ferme 2001: 6) intersects with a watery topography that provides both an unusual level of opportunity and particularly powerful material incentives to be strategic about how much of their lives they reveal to their neighbours, lovers, business partners and rivals (cf. Palmer 1990). And, rather as Bledsoe recommended, my focus in this thesis is not on temporary gendered separation *per se*, but rather on the frictions that emerge for men and women in the highly charged spaces where their two worlds reconverge on the shore (especially **Chapters 4 and 6**).

1.4.3 *Fish and the Substance of Relatedness*

Back on land, the particular material qualities of fish work to foster certain distinctive patterns of relationships. Tissana’s economy exists because of fish, and almost every individual in town depends for their subsistence on being able to catch, dry or exchange them. Fish are the basis of almost every meal, the foundation of almost every household economy, and the subject of a thousand daily dramas, large and small. From my own perspective, it sometimes seemed as though they were the very substance out of which

⁷ The details of how Mende women might become Poro members differ (see Ferme 2001).

Tissana's shifting social fabric was woven. Sitting on the wharf as the fishing boats returned from sea, or in the busy shared kitchen of my own compound as residents distributed their rice in dishes of various carefully calibrated sizes, I observed who was giving what to whom, in exchange for what, and under what circumstances.

Such a materialist approach would resonate well with my neighbours' own accounts of their interpersonal lives. In many cases, the people I knew were negotiating tenuous livelihoods close to the edge of subsistence. As other ethnographers have found in similarly impoverished settings elsewhere in this region, people's daily priorities are very explicitly focused on meeting their basic material needs: almost all other aspects of their relational lives are ultimately refracted through that lens (Cornwall 2002; Leach 1995; Whitehead 1984, 1990). In particular, this thesis could be read as building on Caroline Bledsoe's (1990a, 1990b, 1995) excellent research amongst Mende and Kpelle speakers in the 1980s, in which she paints an uncompromisingly honest picture of the tough personal choices poor men and women are sometimes forced to make: nurturing certain relationships, and neglecting others, in the basic struggle to balance viable livelihoods.

However, fish are not just *any* commodity. They have a specific physical form, and that substance has powerful consequences for the ways in which people in Tissana are able to use them to form social and material relationships. Firstly, as property, fish rot fast. In a town with no refrigeration technology, this simple fact injects economic life with a peculiarly heightened urgency. Boat captains must sell their catch or give it away as soon as they return to land, otherwise watch helplessly as the source of their sustenance and wealth decays into a pungent health hazard. Secondly, as prey, fish are mobile, invisible and highly unpredictable. This not only encourages fishermen to adopt similarly fluid migratory patterns themselves, but also requires people to invest an inflated amount of creative energy and material resources nurturing the social networks that will enable them to survive when their catches fail (because their catches *will* fail).

These two factors combine to mean that Tissana lends itself unusually well to a study foregrounding the materiality of social life. One can go a long way toward tracing the town's ever-shifting lattice of kinship, love and obligation simply by watching gifts of fish and counter-gifts of rice weaving their complex patterns, in real time, through Tissana's social fabric. However, as I explore in the following section, relationships are not only forged through tangible exchanges of fish, rice and cash. They are also cultivated and

manipulated in other, less visible but equally material ways: through the movements of concealed fetish medicines and bodily substances for example, or through the strategic mobilisation of spoken blessings or curses. A central observation of this thesis is that these things are *integral* to the everyday business of economic survival, in ways that challenge any intuitive ontological distinction between the material and immaterial, the ‘supernatural’ and the banal.

1.4.4 *Immaterial Forces and the Substance of Relatedness*

My experience in Tissana forced me to relearn what exactly counts as material in the world of economic transactions. In Tissana, the work people invest in managing their stretched livelihoods often incorporates the use of swears, blessings, amulets and ‘fetish’ medicines: substances and technologies that we might instinctively gloss as belonging to the world of ‘religion’ or ‘ritual’, but which are, in fact, integral to the mundane economic order. To some extent, this is not particularly surprising. There is a large literature within West African ethnography highlighting the absence of any sharp, conceptual distinction between material and spiritual domains. The interweaving of ‘agencies, and their material forms’ (Ferme 2001: 4) can be seen, for example, in the fact that spoken words are often considered a powerful ingredient in the confection of amulets and medicines (Bledsoe and Robey 1986; MacGaffey 1988; Shaw 1997a), or in the fact that seemingly inert material objects are credited with the power to catch and punish criminals (Jędrej 1976; Tonkin 2000). However, scholars have tended to discuss this construction of im/material agency within a very particular framework: as one facet in the underlying workings of the ‘politics of secrecy’ (Bledsoe and Robey 1986; Bellman 1984; Murphy 1980, 1998; Tonkin 1979; Soares 2005).

Mariane Ferme’s (2001) erudite description of ‘the underneath’ of a Mende agrarian landscape achieved something that no earlier study had quite managed: capturing the extent to which unseen forces weave through the entire material fabric of Sierra Leonean life, reaching far beyond explicitly ritual contexts:

[S]ome of these agencies, and their material forms, appear to coincide with others that drew the attention of scholars of comparative religion... But this continuum also includes transformative powers of incompletely controlled forces and materials whose history in Sierra Leone is linked not so much to

religious belief as to the material experience of modernity and the magic associated with it. (2001: 4)

However, for her too, the study of im/materiality seems analytically inseparable from the study of 'secrecy'. Her argument is that Sierra Leone's culture of secrecy developed out of its violent history of slaving, during which there had been very real dangers associated with speaking or acting openly. Other ethnographers had already highlighted the layers of ambiguity and conflicting meaning that riddle spoken discourse in this region (Bellman 1984; Piot 1993), but Ferme went further: seeking to reveal how ambiguous meanings are concealed beneath, and produced through, the material landscape, in the 'tension between surface phenomena and that which is concealed beneath them' (Ferme 2001: 1). Ferme then sets herself a considerable challenge of deciphering for an English-speaking readership how the topography of Mende farms, villages and forests might be read as a shifting text of hidden metaphors and metonyms, the 'semantics' of which evaded all but the most skilful of her Mende informants:

The ability to recognise these clues, and to make one's own interpretation of them gain acceptance among many, forms the basis of the achievement of power in Mende society. However, this process is characterised by struggles, whose outcome is rendered all the more uncertain by the shifting grounds of a hermeneutic of ambiguity, which has been activated by a violent history. (Ferme 2001: 20)

The subject of Ferme's analysis, like mine, is the material fabric of 'everyday' economic and political life — including a whole range of ostensibly rather mundane activities, such as braiding hair, weaving nets and making cloth. However, her analytic approach emphasises that the true 'meanings' carried within these material practices are legible only to a very small minority of Mende people.

Without seeking to contradict Ferme, I was motivated to explore the relationship between the tangible world and its unseen agencies for quite different reasons. My starting point was simply to describe the ways in which my informants were working to survive under conditions of extreme material uncertainty: the things they exchanged, and the ways in which they sought to build and nurture relationships. However, as I suggest in the following section, people's pragmatic, everyday assessments of material value can be a window into a diffuse field of practical knowledge about the substance of the material order, and the scope of human agency within it. This loose, embodied

knowledge of the world is akin to what Foucault (2005 [1966]) called an ‘episteme’. Unlike previous scholars of the history of knowledge, his interest had not been to explore *what* people knew at other times in history, but rather to excavate the shape of the ‘epistemological space’ (ibid: x) that set the most taken-for-granted limits within which it was possible to know the world or act within it. Similarly, my own interest in this thesis is not to decipher the layers of hidden ‘meaning’ that preoccupy Ferme in her study of the Mende landscape. Rather, I explore how the lived anxieties of precarious livelihoods are both shaped by – and productive of – a particular of field of shared knowledge about the moral and material *Order of Things* (ibid). One point I want to emphasise is that, whilst the political use of secrecy and complex understandings of material agency are *both* important facets of social experience in Sierra Leone, it does not follow that they are always two aspects of the same phenomenon.

1.5 ‘Value’ as a Window to the Material Order

Every individual material transaction depends upon two people judging that, at that moment, the things they are exchanging are somehow ‘equivalent’ in value (Guyer 2004). The closer one examines this seemingly simple concept, its complexity multiplies, for nothing ever becomes ‘valued’ in a historical vacuum⁸ (Roitman 2007: 158; Blim 2012). When we come across a surprising situation, such as a town in which poor fishermen routinely exchange the very substance of their subsistence for the spoken blessing of a stranger, it serves as a vivid reminder that, in any economic context, even the most routine daily act of valuation must inevitably connect into a much broader set of philosophical convictions about the substance of the material world they inhabit.

Similarly provoking ethnographic studies can be found in Giovanni da Col's recent account of Tibetan 'cosmoeconomics' — in which, he tells us, ‘transactions of forces such as fortune, luck, and vitality materially inhabit economic exchange and conceptions

⁸ Earlier this year, a group of prominent anthropologists met to debate the possibility of developing a single ‘theory of value’, encompassing both meanings of the word in English: that is, the cost of our material possessions and the essence of our most deeply held political and ethical convictions (Otto, 2013; Lambek, 2013; Graeber, 2013; Sahlins, 2013). Ultimately, their ethnographic studies pointed in such a diversity of directions that the conveners concluded by arguing that ‘anthropology denotes an ‘anti-theory’ of value, and this is exactly where its strength is situated’ (Otto 2013: 4).

of value' (2012: 5191) — or in Steven Gudeman's (2012) description of a Colombian peasant economy in which the 'energy of life' circulating through crops and the bodies of livestock and human beings is conceptualised as a form of currency. But, if this talk of materially valuable 'forces', 'energies' and 'blessings' all sounds rather exotic, we might do well to remember that the value of money could quite reasonably be construed as equally mysterious. Now, of course, there are official economic doctrines according to which it 'makes sense' that banknotes should be valuable. But the interesting point is that most people who depend upon money for their survival would not feel remotely confident hazarding what those doctrines might be (Guyer 1995a; Keane 2008b). On a day-to-day basis, we are not called upon to wonder *why* those tatty pieces of paper can be exchanged for a week's groceries, nor, more bizarrely still, how it is possible that the weightless numbers in our bank accounts can be digitally swapped for a piece of furniture. For all its physical flimsiness, the power of money does not figure in our lives as a theoretical *belief*, but rather as an unquestionable material *reality*. I am struck by the parallels between this 'suspended disbelief' about the value of banknotes, and Olivier de Sardan's comments about the power of sorcery, spirits and magic charms for the Songhay people he knew in Mali:

The practical efficiency of fetishes goes without saying. All that is banal. Ancestors, spirits, sorcerers or magic charms are all familiar concepts in regard to which 'disbelief is suspended', and which need no justification. There is no question of believing or not believing: it is not a case of belief, but of fact, not of the fantastic but of the routine. (1992: 11)

However, just as we have already seen to be the case with previously unquestioned ideas about the 'morality' of economic life, so, too, the material assumptions that underpin economic habits are most likely to be raised to the level of visibility and called into question at moments when people find themselves navigating between two markedly different systems of reckoning value. So, to return to the example of currency: most of us, most of the time, manage our economic lives utterly untroubled by any ontological anxiety as to how it is possible for money to hold value. Yet, as Bill Maurer puts it here, 'People freak out when the apparent hegemony of money's fictionality and abstraction is newly revealed' (2006: 27). There have been the repeated moments in Western history when the materiality of money, *the stuff it is made of*, has changed. During each of these transitions — whether with the introduction of paper banknotes,

the removal of the gold standard, or the currently soaring value of the stateless internet currency, 'Bitcoins' (Maurer 2011) — changes in the materiality of wealth sparked considerable existential uncertainty, as people were forced to question what *really* is holding their economy and, by extension, their society together.

Africa's Atlantic coastline has long proved a particularly salient site for revealing the historical contingency of European philosophies of value (MacGaffey 1988; Guyer 1995a; 2004; Bernault 2012). After all, there was a period of several centuries during which the only people attempting any kind of transcultural communication between these two regions were *merchants*. If, at their most basic level, exchange relationships rely upon two parties agreeing that the things they are exchanging are somehow equivalent in value, then the history of international trade along West Africa's coast reveals how this seemingly obvious mercantile concept can become the aperture through which all manner of fundamental philosophical differences are refracted.

To begin with the most obvious and powerful example: I have already spent some time discussing Sierra Leone's history of domestic slavery and its continuing importance in shaping the more subtle forms of social 'ownership' that persist in rural areas today. These patterns of reckoning wealth and prosperity in terms of 'people' are nowadays recognised as a characteristic feature of life in farming villages across this region (Booth *et al.* 1999). However, Walter Rodney (1966, 1970) famously argued that it was only through their dealings with European slavers, and the lucrative incentives they offered for captured men and women, that African elites first learned to view other human beings as a potential form of *property*. Following in the wake of Rodney's influential work, some of the most interesting scholarship about the Upper Guinea region has continued to unpick the ways in which contemporary values, beliefs and social structures have been shaped through its long, violent history of integration into the Atlantic slave economy (Shaw 2002; Ferme 2001), beliefs and structures that have continued to be reconfigured and given new meaning throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras, and that have been challenged once more during the most recent wave of civil violence (Fanthorpe 2006; Włodarczyk 2006; Knörr and Filho 2010; Murphy 2010; Peters 2010).

In fact, the economic value system *both in* West Africa and Western Europe were challenged and transformed through their long economic encounter with the other. In a

series of extraordinary articles, for example, William Pietz illustrated how even that apparently most archetypical African valuable — the 'fetish' — emerged as a distinct category in both continents' economic discourses only as a result of centuries of miscommunication around exactly this 'mystery of value' (1985: 9). When, in the 15th century, members of European feudal and West African lineage economies faced one another on the coast for the first time, each came up against the problem that their new trading partners judged the allure of things according to a logic entirely different from their own (Pietz 1987, 1985). Portuguese merchants had derided as *fetigo* (witchcraft), any object that their new trading partners valued as powerful and precious, but that fell outside Portuguese assumptions about what kind of materials were capable of holding value or commanding respect. Over the intervening centuries, this 'middleman's word' (Pietz 1987: 23) entered both regions' vocabularies, taking separate but interweaving etymological journeys through each continent's economic history. Nowadays, the concept of 'commodity fetishism' — used to describe the misattribution of human values to material things — is one of the most important concepts in Marxian critiques of capitalism (Taussig 1980). Meanwhile, the people I knew in Tissana referred to 'fetish medicines' and 'fetish people' as a common element of their everyday experience. Here, we see a vivid example of what Jane Guyer had in mind when she described people in West Africa living 'continuously, for several centuries, at an interface of econological zones. As in the case of ecological borderlands, the compositions on each side and even the locations of the meeting zone have shifted, while the fact of a 'divide' has been constant' (1995a: 2-3).

Rodney (1966, 1970) and Pietz (1985, 1987) were describing a period of radical rupture in West African history. However, the general theoretical point also holds true in moments of less violent upheaval. Any significant change in people's everyday economic experience has the potential to transform — or, at the very least, catalyse a more active philosophical reflection about — their sense of the material substance of the world they inhabit. In the post-industrial world, for example, we are living through a historical change in the material substance of the things we value and want to claim as property. An increasing number of things once assumed too fluid, too minute or otherwise ungraspable to be 'owned' are, for the first time, being privatised. In a global economic order in which genetic sequences (Boyle 2003), company brands (Foster 2013) and atmospheric carbon (Dalsgaard 2013) can all have a monetary value, it no longer seems

nonsensical to claim that 'intangible assets are worth more than brick-and-mortar assets' (Foster 2013: 59).

But what can it mean, ethically, practically and legislatively, to 'own' genetic information? What interests me about this so-called 'second enclosure movement' (Boyle 2003) is that, when people set out to build an economy around valuables with material characteristics quite different from anything they have previously claimed to 'possess', a considerable amount of intellectual energy is required simply to establish the answers to questions that, in other contexts, seem so obvious as to be invisible. Any newly emergent way of understanding property inevitably brings with it new patterns by which relationships can be mediated materially.

While the things claimed differ from land in their materiality, anthropological examinations of this second enclosure movement demonstrate that, as with land, processes of privatisation directly affect conceptualisations of persons and groups by specifying the kinds of people and groups who can make property claims... [and so] give rise to particular kinds of social relations, persons and subjectivities. (Busse 2012: 120-1)

Throughout the ethnographic chapters, I describe how men and women choose to invest their limited resources: in the attempt to access fish and money, but also to accumulate the spoken blessings of strangers. I examine how people work to build and manage their vital webs of social and economic relations through material gifts of fish and rice, but also through the strategic use of fetish medicines. Through this detailed description of everyday material negotiations, we see can begin to see how seemingly esoteric fields of knowledge — about the scope of the material world and the limits of human agency within it — are relevant in *all* people's livelihoods.

Just as we see taking place in public debates across the post-industrial world as people adjust to the trend toward privatising 'intangible assets', Sierra Leone's recently burgeoned fishing population have had to respond to the changing material basis of their economic lives by grappling to figure out afresh what exactly 'value' is and where it resides in the material world. This question, in turn, breeds others: how it is possible to pursue, control and accumulate this new class of valuables, and how do these shifting

conceptualisations of value foster new materially mediated patterns of obligation, power, belonging and kinship?

1.6 A Map of this Thesis

The five ethnographic chapters of this thesis were conceived of and written as a series of interrelated empirical studies, rather than elements of a single linear argument. Each reveals a different facet of a material, social and economic order that is vividly in flux. The structure unfolds in a pattern that broadly echoes the structure of this introduction. The early chapters discuss how the specific tensions I observed in Tissana speak to a broader anthropological discourse on 'morality' in times of economic change. The second analytical thread, which comes particularly to the fore in the final two substantive chapters, explores how people's knowledge of the material order both shapes, and is simultaneously *shaped by*, the practical challenges and micropolitical struggles of economic survival in a rapidly changing economic order.

Chapter 2 sets the context of my research, introducing Tissana as a town of apparent paradoxes: a lively, cosmopolitan space, which is also a site of economic exclusion and decline. The chapter sketches a brief economic history of the town, tracking the successive innovation in fishing technology, which enabled its rapid growth from a subsistence fisher-farmer hamlet fifty years ago, to a commercial fishing town. It ends with a discussion of my research methods and limitations.

Chapter 3 speaks strongly to the regional ethnographic debates introduced above in **Section 1.1**. It tells the stories of some of the young men who chose to risk everything, to leave their farming villages and establish a new kind of life on the sea. The migrants' accounts often closely mirror the grievances expressed by young rebel fighters in the aftermath of Sierra Leone's civil war, circling around the themes of patriarchal exploitation. The chapter discusses the migrants' hopes that the economic economy might offer a level of personal autonomy that would be unthinkable within the patron-client strictures of agrarian life, but ends by acknowledging that, in fact, many vulnerable men find themselves drawn rapidly back into extractive forms of patronage.

Chapter 4 continues to explore this tension between people's hopes for 'independence' and their experience of becoming rapidly re-entangled in more binding patterns of economic relations. Through the lens of gendered negotiations, between fishermen and the women who buy and dry their fish, I develop a picture of the constricted forms of material agency available to Tissana's most vulnerable residents. We see, for example, that for the very poorest crewmen, choosing to work with a strong female customer can provide them with a vital safety net whilst allowing them to avoid outright dependency to the owner of their boat. This chapter also explores the repercussions of the Yawri Bay's declining fish stocks for patterns of gendered power. As the balance of supply and demand slides ever further out of their favour on the wharf, *banda* women have learned to invest an ever-greater proportion of their creative energies and material resources, working to build enduring *social* relationships with the fishermen whose catch they want to buy.

Set against a broader regional context in which a person's most basic well-being depends upon being embedded in networks of supportive kin, **Chapter 5** describes some of the practical ways in which people work — by exchanging gifts of fish, rice and other substances — to create the networks of kinship that offer the only form of security net in a highly precarious environment. In such a highly mobile population, the resultant tangle of relatedness bares little resemblance to the neatly hierarchical lineage structures described in classic ethnographic accounts of this region (d'Azevedo 1962a; Little 1967 [1951]). Yet, for all their apparent inclusivity, 'potato rope families' come with their own risks. When ties of kinship can never simply be taken for granted, but must instead be continually re-created materially, then, without sufficient material resources, even the most seemingly 'natural' family bond is vulnerable to atrophy or collapse.

Running throughout the first three ethnographic chapters, we will see repeated examples of 'fetish' medicines (*ifohn*) circulating through the everyday economic order, and forming an integral element of people's mundane livelihood strategies. However, **Chapter 6** marks a gear shift away from the fleshy, ethnographically observable patterns of exchange, to dwell more explicitly on the ways in which people's economic lives are threaded through with material strategies of a less visible kind. There are multiple layers of hiddenness that riddle Tissana's topography. This is a world in which men disappear across the horizon each day, into a watery topography only half-imagined by their neighbours and relatives inland. So, too, a large proportion of Tissana's population is

assumed to have access to an invisible space — sometimes referred to as 'the witch-world' — that maps onto the visible surfaces of the townscape. My goal is to explore the phenomenology of felt ignorance and mistrust that permeate economic life in a context in which much of that which effects a person's livelihood is necessarily hidden from their view. Finally, **Chapter 7** returns to the problem introduced at the beginning of this Introduction, to ask why it *matters* — practically and theoretically — that people in Tissana value spoken words as material element of the world of transactions.

Chapter 2: Context, History, Methods

2.1 Context

According to the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation), Sierra Leone's population depends for 64% of its dietary protein on fish (Laurenti 2008: 64). Shenge, the capital of Kagboro Chiefdom, is the centre of the country's most productive fishery. Each week, traders converge here from every major market town as far as Koidu on the eastern border. Fish dried in Kagboro's smokehouses eventually find their way to household cooking pots in every corner of the country, from Freetown's crowded slums to the remotest forest village.

Yet, despite this vivid, evident connectivity with wider flows of cash, goods and people, the authors of Sierra Leone's only dedicated guidebook describe Shenge as a 'forgotten place' (Manson and Knight 2012: 219). 'Strong in magic and Sherbro heritage' (ibid), the sense one gets from the authors' account is of a place remote — not only in space, but also in time — from the cosmopolitan urban culture they capture so vividly elsewhere in their book. It was only when I first made the journey to the coast myself that this apparent contradiction began to make a little more sense. For, unless you happen to be a fisherman, Shenge is a painfully difficult place to reach.

2.1.1 *The Road to Shenge-Tissana*

In post-war Sierra Leone, travellers are well-hardened to the discomforts of a long-neglected transport network. Yet, even by this poor national standard (*circa.* 2010/11), the traders I knew reserved a special horror for contemplating the journey to Shenge. If travelling by land, then, wherever their journey begins, they must eventually fork off the tarmac road at Moyamba and follow the short, eighty-kilometre 'Highway', which runs like a spine down the length of the Shenge Peninsula.

Much as contemporary British cities have 'Haymarkets' and 'Canongates', the fact that this route should be known as a 'Highway' at all is a trace of a former age: a time before the war when, I was told, the road had been so smooth and fast you could travel its entire length in a single hour. In the early 1990s there had even been — and this part of

the tale is recounted in a tone of wonderment — *government buses* plying its route. Later, in the 1990s, the Highway had become one of the busiest thoroughfares in Sierra Leone. During that decade of devastating violence, the Shenge Peninsula had been almost the only part of the country to escape rebel attack.⁹ So, when all other routes in and out of Freetown had been blocked by armed fighters, this peripheral region found itself transformed, albeit temporarily, into one of the busiest trading hubs in the country, channelling food and other essential supplies to towns throughout the southern provinces.

Travelling the dilapidated road today, it is not easy to conjure these images in one's mind's eye. Nibbled away on either side by hungry, tropical vegetation, the Highway's sandy earth has been carved by successive rainy season downpours into gullies and potholes so deep as to leave the road all but impassable. In places one can make out valiant but largely unsuccessful efforts by work-teams from local villages to salvage the road from complete self-destruction, packing tree trunks and sacks of sand into the deepest trenches in its surface (see Figure 1).

This is what has been promised, promised, promised with every government that comes: 'We'll mend the road, we'll mend the road, we'll mend the road.' If they could mend the road, even as far as Moyamba, things would be very easy for us.
(Pa Lunsar, elder, Shenge)

For the fortunate few who can (as I could) afford the considerable expense, it is possible to charter a motorcycle to carry you, weaving and bumping, three hours from Moyamba to the coast. For everybody else, only a single, small, unreliable passenger vehicle attempts the journey each week. This road remains the only land artery serving a chiefdom with a population of well over 30,000 people (Sierra Leone Statistics 2004: 11). Yet, as evidence of just how sparse traffic had become in the rainy season, we would often pass villages in which people had spread their laundry across the entire width of the Highway, utilising a channel of rainwater to rinse their clothes.

The terrain we are passing through is one of the last remaining pockets of Sierra Leone in which Sherbro is the most commonly spoken language. Extending some fifty kilometres inland along either side of the Kagboro River inlet, the landscape of Kagboro

⁹ People in Shenge usually agreed that the reason rebel soldiers never ventured as far as their town was for fear of becoming entrapped on the peninsula surrounded by three sides by water.

Chiefdom is a patchwork of sandy soils and salty mangrove swamps, as difficult to cultivate as it is to navigate (see Figure 2). The farmers who eke out their livelihoods from these unpromising soils are amongst the poorest, remotest communities in one of the poorest countries on earth (UNDP 2012). Having once dominated the entire length of Sierra Leone's coastline, Sherbro speakers nowadays have such a low national profile that when I travelled elsewhere in the country I often encountered people who told me, with confidence, that the language no longer exists. It highlights how marginalised Kagboro's 20,000 Sherbro-speaking farmers have become, that even in a country as small as Sierra Leone it is possible for their existence to be so completely overlooked:

People wait and expect the government to do things for them, like build a path to their village, but I tell them, 'Listen. The government will not come here. [President] Bai Koroma will never, ever come here... No minister will ever come here. We have our Member of Parliament, [but] she can only go where motorcars go. If we want a path, it is only we: it is only we who have to do it.' (Pa Lunsar, elder, Shenge)

But if Sierra Leone's government sometimes appears to have abandoned Kagboro altogether, its fish traders cannot. Such is the nation's demand for dried fish that once a week lorry loads of urban traders take a deep breath, count their money, and clamber aboard a truck to brave the uncomfortable journey to Shenge (see Figure 3). These massive vehicles, which on their return journey are piled precariously high with a seemingly impossible load of fish and passengers, must creep and sway so tentatively across the Highway's hostile terrain that, in the wet season, it often takes two days to complete the short, eighty-kilometre route. 'That vehicle is dangerous! You sit on top, like a two-storey building! And the road is so bad! Sway-swaying, all the way. I don't want to die!' (Lucy, fish trader).

After a long, painful day cramped aboard one of those lumbering fish trucks, traders finally grind to a standstill in Shenge's 'vehicle park': a peaceful, open, leafy space. Around the perimeter are dotted a few wooden stalls, selling an assortment of small luxuries from cigarettes and powdered milk to pens and mobile phone credit. At its far end, the passengers get their first glimpse of the sea, where a steep ramp leads down to a small wharf and now-decaying jetty.

Although it may not be obvious at first glance, Shenge was consciously oriented to an international world from the very date of its foundation in 1854 (Caulker-Burnett 2010; Fyfe 1962). Nowadays the townscape is littered with so many abandoned buildings — once-fine compounds being swallowed back into the forest or teetering precariously on the brink of an eroding bluff — one sometimes gets the impression that nature might, at any moment, reclaim for itself the entire peninsula upon which the town is built. By far the most striking and poignant of these ruins is a massive, derelict fish-processing facility on the edge of town. Built by the FAO in the 1980s, the hulking buildings that once housed ice factories and state-of-the-art machine workshops now stand empty and decaying: a striking monument to the crumbling interventionism of a previous era.

2.1.2 *The View from the Sea*

It does not take long to realise that this first impression of retrenchment and decay is only a tiny part of Kagboro's story. In fact, this stretch of coastline is anything but stagnant. Nor is it now, any more than it has been at any point in its centuries of recorded history, isolated. Facing the sea, the view from Kagboro is entirely different. The Shenge Peninsula protrudes into some of the richest, most navigable — and busiest — fishing grounds in West Africa (see Figure 4). To its north lie the expansive intertidal mudflats of the Yawri Bay; to its south and east, the wide estuary of the Sherbro River, protected from the ocean by Sherbro Island to the south. Whereas fishermen elsewhere on the Upper Guinea Coast have no choice but to brave the fierce, unforgiving depths of the open Atlantic, the shallow seas around Shenge provide comparatively sheltered conditions for breeding fish, and vulnerable fishing vessels alike. As experienced fishermen like Pa Gberiwa will tell you: 'The reason there are so many fish here is that fish like rivers. There is no fishing ground like this fishing ground; like this Kagboro fishing ground. It is the best in the whole country. We in Shenge, up to today, we supply the whole country.'

In fact, when Sierra Leoneans elsewhere in the country talk about 'Shenge', what they are most likely to be referring to is the cluster of bustling, multi-ethnic satellite towns that surround it: Katta and Shengebul to the north; Plantain Island to the west — and, sprawling for almost two miles along the south-western shore of the Peninsula, my field site, Tissana Wharf. These satellite towns have been attracting a steady stream of fresh migrants for most of the past century. Many of these settlers are experienced fisherfolk

from elsewhere along the coast. Just as often, however, young people relocate here from towns and farming villages inland, attracted by the hope of new opportunities on the sea. Such has been the rate of migration to the coast in recent generations that, along the ocean-facing fringes of Kagboro Chiefdom, Sherbro speakers are nowadays only one of many minorities in a complex polyglot society:

We Sherbros have always lived on the coast...All the other people who came and based themselves here, they all migrated here. Most of them are Northerners – Temnes – from Makeni, from Port Loko... They came here. We taught them how to fish, and now, some of them are professionals more than us! We have a lot of tribes. Loads and loads of tribes have come and based themselves here. Aside from we — the actual citizens, the actual landowners, we the Sherbros — we have Temnes here, we have Mendes, Limbas, we have Fulas. Even some Senegalese are here. (Pa Sese, elder, Shenge)

So, however remote Tissana may appear on first encounter, it is, in fact, a highly cosmopolitan world. The Shenge Peninsula sits almost exactly at the centre of Sierra Leone's most congested fishing zone, the coasts of which are peppered with at least a dozen busy wharf towns (*alehns*). Tissana's fishermen can reach any one of these towns fairly easily in the space of a day; and, if they judge it will give them better access to the waters where the fish are currently shoaling, boat captains often choose to base themselves for a period or days or weeks in one of these other *alehns*.

This image of the waters of the Yawri Bay, filled with a busy traffic of migratory fishermen, fits very neatly with our currently fashionable image of seascapes as spaces of connectivity. It had once appeared fairly self-evident to historians and social scientists that, for 'terrestrial mammals' (Ingold 1994: x), coastlines marked the edges of human space. Oceans were socially relevant, largely insofar as they formed a natural barrier between one land-based community and another. Over the past few decades, however, in tandem with our own ever-quickenening experience of globalisation, there has been a steady reorientation toward considering seascapes in exactly the opposite light: as the medium that connects peoples across distances.

Sidney Mintz (1985) and Paul Gilroy (1993) were among the first in this important trend in global history to 'invert scholarly convention' (Wigen 2006: 720), by exploring what happens when they shift their gaze from land-based societies to 'ocean-centred realities'

(Wigen 2007: 17; cf. Pearson 2009). In two quite different but equally influential studies of Atlantic history, both authors revealed an image of the ocean — not as a vast dividing space — but rather as a busy communicative network, criss-crossed with a constant traffic of ships, bearing people, commodities and ideas that would radically transform the societies on all its coastlines. Making a related argument for the Pacific Ocean, Epeli Hau'ofa (1993) has argued that European traders and colonisers consistently misrepresented Oceania when they described it as a scattering of tiny, isolated islands. Far from being cut off from the wider world by the tracts of water that surrounded them, Hau'ofa claims that Oceanic peoples had always experienced their universe as a 'sea of islands': not divided, but connected, by the water.

Although ethnographic studies of actual seascapes remain surprisingly sparse (Ballinger 2006), social anthropologists have become interested 'in rethinking the world in fluid terms' (Helmreich 2011: 137); enlisting images of watery 'flows' and 'circulations', wherever we want to allude to the increased mobility and interconnectivity of the globalising world (Appadurai 1994; Mol and Law 1994). If islands had once been the ethnographic field site of choice, precisely because they were assumed to be isolated and self-contained (Gupta and Ferguson 1997), seascapes have now come to stand in the anthropological imagination as the metaphor of choice for interconnectedness.

My initial sense had been that I ought to find some way to compensate for the fact that, as a woman, I was unable to move through the seascape with these migratory fishermen. Throughout my early months of fieldwork, I travelled widely around the fringes of the Yawri-Sherbro fishing zone, on what I had originally conceived of as a series of 'reconnaissance' trips, looking for the multiple field sites that would enable me to capture this fluid maritime economy from as many directions as possible. I took several trips to the frenetic Plantain Island, as well as to the Yawri Bay's most urban fishing centre, Tombo. I visited Gbangbatoke and Banana Island, and spent several days, too, in Ndema Chiefdom — the scattering of remote, low-lying islands on the far side of the Sherbro Estuary, where the Sherbro-speaking communities continue to subsist on the kind of low-intensity canoe-fishing and cassava farming that characterised Kagboro's coastal economy a couple of generations ago.

Whilst it was enlightening to catch glimpses of the broader topography through which fishermen were moving, I eventually rejected the idea of a truly multisited ethnography.

The longer I lived in Tissana, and the more absorbed I became in the lives and dramas of my immediate neighbours, I realised that, although their social lives and material livelihoods were heavily shaped by the relentless comings and goings of fishermen and traders, most of the people whom I knew best led rather sedentary lives on a year-to-year basis.¹⁰ For most of Tissana's women, children and non-seafaring men, urban markets and foreign wharfs were present in their lives primarily as imagined spaces. Some made occasional hair-raising boat trips to Tombo, but, whether for lack of need or a well-founded fear of those notoriously dangerous passenger boats, most never strayed from dry land at all.

When faced with screens that obscure our vision, we tend to assume that 'what lies beyond the façade — the backstage rather than the front stage, the face rather than the mask — is where the core of culture lies' (Gable 1997: 215). Certainly, there were multiple levels on which I was excluded from important aspects of Tissana's social, economic and ontological order. However, to one extent or another, the majority of people in Tissana found themselves in a similar position. Very few of my neighbours had been initiated into the deepest secrets of their respective initiation society, for example; and only a fraction were familiar with the distant urban marketplaces upon which, ultimately, all their livelihoods depended. To the extent that the sea was an ever-present 'focus' in the lives of Tissana's women — and certainly it was — it was so only in the sense we might use to describe renaissance draughtsmanship; a focal point on the horizon where one's gaze is drawn but where, in fact, all lines are destined to converge and vanish. The ocean remained for us a potent but largely imagined space; a skyline under which men disappeared in their boats each morning and from whence, we hoped, they might return bearing fish. To this extent, my own pervasive sense of felt ignorance was not only a limitation, but also, in itself, a form of ethnographic participation (Mair *et al.* 2012).

2.2 An Economic History of the Kagboro Coast

In this section, I outline the economic history of the Kagboro coastline, beginning with its precolonial heritage as an important hub in the Atlantic slave trade. I trace the various waves of migration, and shifts in fishing technology and culture, which have seen

¹⁰ It was common for women, children and non-seafaring men to have relocated several times over the course of their lifetimes — but not to move at the same restless pace that characterised the lives of fishermen.

Tissana develop from a tiny subsistence village into the busy, cosmopolitan fishing town it is today. The town's history forms one window into a much broader set of social and economic changes that were taking place across maritime Sierra Leone in this period, in which previously discreet fisher-farming communities have increasingly been assimilated within a highly integrated commercial fishing world. As I explore here, this trajectory has not always been experienced as one of unambiguous 'progress'. Set against a backdrop of national political violence, civil war and, most recently, a precipitous decline in fish stocks, people in coastal Kagboro have sometimes responded to these transformations with profound ambivalence.

2.2.1 *Precolonial Era: Slavers, Colonialists and Chiefs*

The precolonial history of Kagboro Chiefdom — like the history of the Upper Guinea Coast in general, in fact — is usually narrated as a violent story of slavers and warring chiefs (Fyfe 1962; Caulker-Burnett 2010; Manson and Knight 2012). The first Europeans to reach these shores had been Portuguese traders in the mid-15th century. From their arrival, the strangers established themselves under the patronage of local Sherbro landlords, exchanging imported metals and textiles for African ivory, animal hides and, most lucratively of all, slaves. The profits to be made dealing with the white traders attracted an increasing number of Africans to the coast, to the creole settlements that were growing up there¹¹ (Fyfe 1962; Rodney 1970; Shaw 2002). As the New World plantation economy expanded over the next three centuries, the market for Sierra Leonean slaves steadily accelerated, gradually usurping all other trade goods and fuelling a commerce that was to have a profound and destructive repercussion throughout the region, as local wars were repeatedly orchestrated to meet the insatiable European demand for African bodies (Rodney 1966).

Although it is hardly the subject of day-to-day conversation, my neighbours in Shenge-Tissana knew very well that their coastline had once been amongst the busiest, most profitable ports in the export of human beings to the New World. As a foreigner, I was often asked if I had visited the crumbling remains of the slave fort that can still be seen on Plantain Island, a couple of miles off the coast. Nor is it any secret, either, that their

¹¹ Even now, many centuries since the decline of Portuguese influence in this region, both the Sherbro and Temne languages are peppered with hundreds of Portuguese loanwords (Pichl 1967; Turay 1979).

proud, chiefly family traces its heritage to a mixed-race dynasty of slave traders¹² (Fyfe 1962, 1964; Jones 1983). In front of an audience of American anthropologists in 1977, then Paramount Chief of Kagboro, Madame Honoria Bailor-Caulker, had made this startlingly frank admission:

Yes, the Caulkers were slavers. They ruled the shores of the Yawri Bay... and their territory included Plantain and Banana Islands. Those islands were busy slave trading centres, regularly visited by ships from Europe; the Caulkers grew rich and powerful on the slave trade... but history cannot be eradicated... furthermore, powerful chiefs frankly prefer their ancestry to be rooted among the strong that ruled rather than among the weak that were enslaved. (Cited in Reader 1997: 379-80)

There was a centuries-long period during which the Caulkers had been one of the wealthiest, most powerful families on the Upper Guinea Coast. In common with many of the slaving dynasties in this region, they worked hard to maintain the prestige of their transatlantic heritage, often sending their children to be educated in England. However, when the British abolitionist movement finally took hold in the early 19th century, their fortunes began to wane. When the crown colony of Sierra Leone was established at the other end of the Yawri Bay, as the centre of British efforts to police the Atlantic trade, the slave fort on Plantain Island rapidly fell out of use.

The Caulkers relocated to mainland Shenge in a bid to control the emerging 'legitimate' trade in timber. However, with the British channelling their commerce ever more exclusively through their colony, Shenge's prominence in the Atlantic economy continued to ebb (Fyfe 1962, 1964). At the turn of the 20th century, the British had coaxed provincial chiefs — including the Caulkers — into signing a contract that, in theory at least, was supposed to bring their territories under the 'protection' of Freetown (Little 1967 [1951]: 46). In reality, though, both the Brits and Freetown's emerging urban Krio elite kept their direct interference in hinterland regions to a minimum. Having been a prominent node in the long, brutal history of Atlantic slaving, Shenge all but disappears from published histories of Sierra Leone. So, viewed from the perspective of their once-powerful ruling elite, Shenge's 20th-century history might be

¹² Thomas Corker arrived on the Sherbro Coast in 1684 as an agent of the British Royal African Company, and married the daughter of Kagboro's Chief. Their son, Skinner, inherited his grandmother's extensive coastal kingdom at the very peak of the Atlantic slave trade, at a time when four to six thousand slaves were being dispatched from Sierra Leone each year.

told as one of stagnation and decline. However, there is another quite different economic history to be told along this coast. As I discuss in the following section, the satellite fishing towns that surround Shenge have experienced almost a century of steady population growth and economic intensification.

2.2.2 *Fishing from 1910 to the 1960s: Immigration, Innovation and Intensification*

The Sherbro-speaking fishermen I knew were proud of their well-deserved reputation, famous across Sierra Leone, as uniquely skilled seamen and navigators. Cho was not the only one of my neighbours to have boasted to me, at length; ‘Of course I can swim! Eh?! I am a Sherbro! We are fishermen. We have *always* been fishermen! If you saw me in the water, you’d think I was a fish!’ However, whilst it is true that people on this coastline have been relying on the ocean to provide for their protein for as long as anyone can remember, the intensive focus on fishing, fish processing and trade, which nowadays shapes so many aspects of social life on this coast, is a relatively recent development.

Paddling out to sea in tiny, streamlined canoes, fishermen like Cho catch such small numbers of fish that they rarely make a substantial profit (see Figure 5). Unable to base their entire subsistence on fishing alone, most Sherbro-speaking households continue to invest considerable time and energy in small-scale agriculture. In important respects, then, their livelihood patterns retain a strong thread of continuity with that time — just at the cusp of living memory now — before commercial traders began to visit this coast; when Sierra Leone’s fishing industry had been, as Thomas Aldridge had put it, a ‘hand-to-mouth affair’ (Aldridge 1910: 249). Here, Tissana’s oldest living resident, Mi Yoki, is remembering Tissana as it had been, when she grew up there in the 1920s:

The place was small! Down there, there was a house. But all around here, it was just thick-thick-thick bush. We didn’t know *anything*. We didn’t know business. We didn’t even have a *lappa* to tie [clothes to wear]. First time, there was no money in fishing.

In fact, although I ought to stress from the start that this differs from any version of oral history that I was ever recounted by my own informants, Carol MacCormack has suggested that Tissana traces its origins to a community of domestic slaves, initially sent

by their Sherbro masters to carry out the hard labour of clearing fresh farmland along the coast:

In the early nineteenth century, Tasso, at the mouth of the Sherbro River, was an important salt making site. Tasso salt was traded for Mende and Kono slaves, who then made farms for the ‘owners of the land’ [*ram de*]. Slaves were settled in villages around Tasso. One, Yondu, just up the coast from Tasso, means ‘slave’ in the Kono language; other slave villages were Marthin, Dibia, Pati and Tissana... In this area of villages clustered around Tasso, by the latter half of the nineteenth century, slaves and clients far outnumbered those who were *ram de*. (MacCormack 1977: 192)

In other contexts, in agricultural areas further inland, anthropologists have tended to agree that the social memory of domestic slavery remains palpably imprinted across the landscape today, fossilised in the enduring power relations between a central town, inhabited by members of the landowning lineage, and the residents of its satellite hamlets who are, even now, tacitly stigmatised as the descendants of former slaves (Little 1967 [1951]: 105; d’Azevedo 1962a). In his later work, Paul Richards (2005) has suggested that in some parts of Sierra Leone these inequalities continue to be so strongly felt — and so strongly resented — that they may be one of the reasons that during the civil war, smaller, more isolated farming settlements provided the most fertile grounds for recruiting rebel soldiers.

Kagboro Chiefdom, however, bucks this trend. In terms of wealth and commercial vibrancy, older towns like Tasso and Shenge have long since been eclipsed by the now-thriving satellite settlements that had, once upon a time, housed their slaves. In this sense, Tissana’s name — which derives from the Sherbro, *Tir Sana*, ‘New Town’ — has proven accommodatingly pliable. It may be that a settlement was once founded on this site as a new town for Kono and Mende slaves, but Tissana is nowadays represented, in public at least, as an altogether newer town. Across all my interviews, no elder I spoke to ever admitted to a knowledge of the town’s history that stretched beyond a far more recent founding story, when Temne fish traders first began to arrive at the coast in significant numbers in the 1920s and ‘begged’ permission to settle there. In this story, only a single family is mentioned as having inhabited the land near Tissana Wharf prior to the Temnes’ arrival. The head of this family, Pa Humpa Togbe — who was to become

landlord and patron to the entire first wave of Temne settlers — is nowadays publicly remembered as the ‘first’ of Tissana’s first-time people.

When the Temne people started coming here, in the 1920s, 30s... It was first they who made these big smokehouses [*bandas*], like you see now. They started buying fresh fish from our canoes, and smoking them, and taking them away — far away, inland — to sell. They’d buy them cheap-cheap, and go and make a lot of money. So this fish trading flourished. (George Thomas, retired politician)

This was a time of rapid change across much of Sierra Leone, as the colonial regime made its first serious attempt to integrate hinterland regions into its broader modernising project for state. Perhaps the most significant development over this period was the construction of a railway running south-east from Freetown, along which a string of new towns emerged as ‘centres both for native and modern trade’ (Little 1967 [1951]: 68). The demand generated by these emerging urban centres helped drive the intensification of the commercial fishing economy. By the middle of the 20th century, Kenneth Little was describing ‘quite a large local trade... in dried fish, mainly *bonga*, which has been brought from places like Bonthe and Shenge on the coast’ (ibid: 67).

In the early 1950s the Shenge Highway was built, connecting the Kagboro Coast overland to the interior for the first time. With this increased connectivity came an accelerating trickle of migrants. Before long, the newcomers were not only processing and trading fish, but also going to sea themselves, building larger canoes than Sherbro fishermen had typically done, with the aim of catching fish for trade on the commercial market. In this respect (and others) we can see striking parallels with the patterns reported in Kono’s alluvial diamond centres around the same period, when informal mining first began attracting large numbers of young people from farming villages around Sierra Leone and beyond (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962).

However, the really radical shift in Tissana’s economy had come quite abruptly in 1959 when the first of several waves of Ghanaian migrant fishermen arrived in the towns around Shenge, bringing with them vastly larger boats, longer nets and more productive deep-water fishing methods than had ever been seen in this region before. Fante speakers have a reputation across West Africa as remarkably accomplished seamen. For

many years they had been migrating up and down the coast of Ghana, following the seasonal movements of shoaling *bonga*. From the 1940s, Fante fishermen began travelling much greater distances in search of underexploited waters, eventually reaching as far as Nigeria and Senegal (Marquette *et al.* 2002).

As Tissana's last remaining Ghanaian elder put it to me, 'We came because there were so many *bonga* here and the [local] people didn't know how to fish yet' (Pa Goaso, Tissana). Jacob had been a young boy at the time, but this quote captures some of the wonder local people had felt on their initial encounter with the foreign fishermen:

They arrived, paddling, paddling in their boats. Big boats! So big... [Their boats were] sharp at both ends, with a sail. Three or four boats would come in one day! And when they arrived, there were maybe 30 people in each boat — because they were coming with their wives, their children, their pots, everything... They settled in Patti, Shenge, Plantain, Katta. They stayed by themselves; they built their own houses. Eeeeeeee, that time there! If you saw the fish they caught! Those people, they know how to fish!

Whereas Kagboro's fishermen were reliant on dugout canoes, the vast Fante vessels went to sea with crews of up to fifteen men. Where they saw evidence of *bonga* shoaling beneath the water's surface, they would paddle rapidly around them, casting their kilometre-long net in a wide loop so as to entrap the entire shoal. Perhaps unsurprisingly, local fishermen had initially been alarmed by the massive volumes of fish being caught each day in the nets of these foreign boats:

Ahhh, people became angry. With our canoes we'd catch a few dozen fish, and these Ghanaians, with their big boats, would catch a hundred thousand fish or more! Our people said, 'This is *a lot* of fish! These Ghanaians have come to finish our fish! No no, we will not take it!' There was a big row, big palaver. (Harry, Tissana)

Local fisherfolk considered their livelihoods to be under such direct threat from overfishing that the men's Poro society mobilised to attempt to drive away the newcomers by force.

- Pa Goaso: When people saw that every day we Ghanaians would catch a canoe-full of *bonga*, they became jealous! They used their society to go and trouble the fishermen in the sea.
- Jacob: Yes! They used our society to organise the attack – the Poro society.
- Pa Goaso: Because we Ghanaians are not Poro men. So they went and started to fight our fishermen in the sea.

Eventually, following the intervention of the colonial governor, an uneasy truce had been reached¹³ when Fante boat captains agreed to take local men to sea with them and teach them their methods. At their peak there had been well over a thousand Ghanaian fishermen in the towns around Shenge, along with their wives and families. Then, as suddenly as they had arrived, they left again. In 1967, for reasons that were never made explicit in Shenge, Siaka Stevens' newly elected government deported all the Fante fishermen *en masse* back to Ghana. Nowadays, only Pa Goaso remains.

Yet in their short, eight-year residence these migrant fishermen sowed the seed that would transform the entire character of Kagboro's economy. Today, full-scale 'Ghana-boats' remain a potent, and for most fishermen wholly unattainable, emblem of wealth. However, the four-to-five-man 'yele boats' (see Figure 6) — now by far the most common model of fishing vessel in the Yawri-Sherbro region — are essentially a scaled-down replica of those impressive Fante vessels, and use similar methods. Pa Moses's experience is typical of a man of his generation:

When I first came here, from Temne land [in the 1950s], I began to go to sea, fishing with those small nets. With that fishing, you couldn't catch a hundred dozen [fish]. You couldn't do it! So, when the Ghanaians came, I joined their boat. We left our own boat and followed them to sea, to learn how to fish... Once we'd learned, then we left the Ghana men and built our own *yele* boat.

2.2.3 *The 1970s and 1980s: Tissana's Boom Years*

The compound I lived in was known, across Tissana and all its neighbouring towns, as 'Site'. The name is a throwback to the period some thirty years earlier, when an

¹³ This had been the dying years of British colonial presence in Sierra Leone.

ambitious young Minister of Parliament, George Thomas, had made this the largest construction site ever seen on this stretch of the Sierra Leonean coastline. The majority of homes in this region are built of mud and thatch. Those relatively few people wealthy enough to invest in modern building materials, such as concrete and corrugated iron, continue to build homes, which in design and layout closely resemble the traditional style. Although now seriously dilapidated, Site — with its open yard leading to a wide, pink façade, with its large windows, iron-railed veranda and spacious parlour — continues to look completely different from a typical Tissana home.

George Thomas was the son of the young sub-chief who had welcomed that first trickle of Temne-speaking settlers, back in the 1920s, when Tissana was still a tiny fisher-farmer hamlet. By the time Pa Thomas was an adult, the character of the entire Kagboro coastline had been radically transformed by the accelerating flow of Temne migrants. Carol MacCormack's (1982) survey of Katta Village, conducted in 1976, provides a valuable snapshot of the dizzying rapidity with which these transformations were taking place. Situated a few miles away, on the northern shore of the Shenge Peninsula, Katta is very similar in size and character to Tissana. At the time of MacCormack's survey, it had been a very new town indeed. Only a decade after its population first began to mushroom in the 1960s, Katta had well over a thousand residents and had already surpassed Shenge as the largest town in Kagboro Chiefdom. Already¹⁴ at this time, only nine per-cent of the households she surveyed had been headed by a Sherbro-speaking person. Even more striking, almost half the adults she recorded were unmarried, male 'strangers', unrelated to the person whose compound they were living in.

It was young strangers like these who had formed George Thomas's support base, when he first ran for Parliament in 1973. The only previous Minister for Kagboro had been a prominent member of Shenge's old elite Caulker lineage. When the 'foreigners' in Shenge's erstwhile slave towns succeeded in electing their candidate for political office, it had stood as a striking symbol that profound social changes were underway. By the end of my eighteen months of fieldwork, there were certain stories about Pa Thomas's time in office with which I had grown very familiar indeed. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Pa Thomas had bankrolled members of the Orjeh society to perform almost every evening with their masquerade devils. A predominantly Temne initiation society, the

¹⁴ Nowadays Plantain is the most populous settlement.

Orjeh is, to its followers, the most exuberantly ‘fun-making’ of all Sierra Leone’s sodalities; and, as these two veteran supporters of Pa Thomas retell, their high-profile presence in Kagboro was conceived of, absolutely explicitly, as a party political campaign tool:

Mama Digba Before, when this man was in power, there was so much gladdy-gladdy [joyfulness] here! We danced every day. We’d play-play, play-play with the Orjeh men.

Pa Brima People would dance; the devils would dance! People would enjoy!...Ah, this place was famous... We didn’t sit down! We’d go all over [the chiefdom]. For two weeks at a time, we’d be out; we would campaign. We would dance.

In common with many of Pa Thomas’s most vociferous supporters, Mama Digba and Pa Brima were first-generation settlers on this coastline. However, from the start, this ‘foreign’ society had been feared by many longer-term Kagboro residents as an aggressive move to usurp the once incontrovertible authority of Shenge’s own Poro society. Given that I was living as a guest in Pa Thomas’s property, it was some time before the darker side of his reputation was revealed to me. But eventually an increasing number of my neighbours began to recount that the very same people who had delighted crowds with their exuberant, rum-fuelled performances would take anyone who dared to dissent against Pa Thomas’s leadership to punish them in the sinisterly named ‘naughty corner’ (*fitei* corner) at the edges of town. For most of this period, Shenge’s then-Paramount Chief, Honoria Bailor-Caulker (herself a powerful and extremely controversial figure), sought refuge in Freetown for her safety. When the findings of the country’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission were published in 2004, they singled out Kagboro as emblematic of all that had been most problematic in Sierra Leonean politics in the decades leading up to civil war (2004: 33).

Whatever their ethnicity or political allegiance, almost everyone I knew in Shenge-Tissana represented the long-running conflict between the Poro and Orjeh societies, as the single most salient theme in their regional political history; more noteworthy, even, than the civil war that brushed so frighteningly close to their coastline in the 1990s.

Although this thesis is not explicitly concerned with the politics of initiation societies,¹⁵ the history of the conflict between the Poro and the Orjeh foreshadows a theme that will run as a thread throughout my ethnographic discussion. An important general quality of life on the Kagboro Coast is that areas of social life we may intuitively want to gloss over as ‘esoteric’ or ‘ritual’ are very often utterly integral to the concrete, everyday workings of power. Just as we saw a decade previously, at the moment of the Ghanaians’ arrival in the Yawri Bay, these so-called ‘secret’ societies emerged to play a very public — and violently decisive — role in mediating economic conflicts.

Underlying the power struggle between the old chieftaincy capital and its erstwhile slave settlement, a fundamental reorientation was taking place in Kagboro’s economy. As we have seen, the Sherbro-speaking residents of this coastline had historically been subsistence fisher-farmers. Whilst perfectly capable of covering long distances in their streamlined canoes, their social identities and material livelihoods had remained strongly rooted in the land. However, alongside the important *technological* innovations of the 1960s and 70s had come an even more dramatic shift in the *character* of fishing society. What Kagboro’s fisherfolk learned from the Fante example was that it is possible for commercially successful fishermen to sever their dependence on agriculture altogether.

Thus freed from any economic need to have roots in the land or its history, a radically new kind of fishing economy began to evolve, with repercussions that penetrated deep into people’s social and moral lives. The Yawri Bay’s fast expanding wharf towns developed between them a distinctive form of maritime cosmopolitanism, as fishermen learned to migrate back and forth across the watery region in search of the richest fishing grounds. The new fluidity of the fishing society is perhaps illustrated most vividly by Plantain Island’s dramatic efflorescence as a commercial fishing town from this period. Despite being too small and too sandy to support even a single productive farm, Plantain is nowadays home to the largest and most frenetically busy town on Sierra Leone’s southern coast.

Here, it is worth recalling Honoria Bailor-Caulker’s strident statement, cited earlier in this chapter, that ‘history cannot be eradicated [and...] furthermore powerful chiefs frankly prefer their ancestry to be rooted among the strong that ruled rather than among the

¹⁵ But see Pratten (2008), Bentor (2008) and Nunley (1988).

weak that were enslaved' (cited in Reader 1997: 379-80). We can now see that she was staking a defiant claim to conservatism at a moment when her chiefdom was experiencing profound political and economic transformation. The fact is, even as she spoke in 1977, the importance of history was being rapidly eroded (if not 'eradicated') by a clamour of migrant hopes for newly forged futures. As the fishing economy continued to intensify over the following decades, the real basis of wealth across coastal Kagboro has become ever more thoroughly dislocated from the ancestral claims upon which Bailor-Caulker's framing of herself as a 'powerful chief' depended.

The latter decades of the 20th century are nowadays remembered with nostalgia in Tissana, as a period of seemingly inexorable boom. As ever more fishermen abandoned their dugout canoes in favour of new techniques that emulated the Ghanaian style, the quantity of fish being landed on Tissana's wharf seemed always to outstrip supply. The early 1980s saw another apparently great leap forward in fishing technology, this time in the form of large-scale dragnet fishing that local people refer to as '*sim-boat*'. This innovation was brought by a migrant from Sierra Leone's northern Bullom Coast, having originated on Ivory Coast. The method involves using a boat to cast a net, in a wide (kilometre-long) arc through the shallow coastal waters. Two teams of people then wade out into the sea and gradually draw the net up onto the beach, corralling the fish into a large mesh sack at its centre (see Figure 7). At the time of its introduction, *sim-boat* fishing had been far more efficient than any pre-existing method, and yielded vastly greater quantities of fish.

It would be difficult to overstate the general sense of nostalgia with which people remember the relative affluence of that period, when Tissana's waters had seemed to contain unlimited riches. Mammy Hawa's effusive tone here is typical; 'Ah! This country was sweet! A sweet-sweet country, you see here. This country, which has become so hard now. Sweet!' By contrast, as Mammy Hawa suggests, the past two decades are often narrated as a tale of encroaching hardship. Despite the enormous influence of technological innovations imported from elsewhere in West Africa, international efforts to consciously 'develop' Sierra Leone's fishing economy have had a far more limited effect. The FAO funded a flagship fisheries project in Shenge in the 1980s, including a large fish-processing complex. The project's heyday was short-lived, however; after war broke out in 1991, it fell rapidly into disrepair.

2.2.4 *The 1990s to the Present Day: An Alternative War Story, and an Economy Under Pressure*

The war years are remembered in Tissana with profound ambivalence. On one hand, the local Kamajor 'civil defence force' governed Kagboro with considerable harshness. I heard countless stories, too, of families fleeing their homes in the middle of the night, to hide in the bush or to paddle out to sea: 'Because there was this fear. There was this fear around the area. We always thought that the rebels were on their way' (Jacob, elder). Those traders who continued to travel inland to sell fish had much more direct and traumatic exposure to the violence that was tearing their country apart.

However, the Shenge Peninsula was one of only a few tiny pockets of Sierra Leone that was neither attacked by rebels, nor became the site of its own rebellion. Indeed, economically at least, it thrived. Shenge's now-sleepy 'vehicle park' was transformed into a heaving marketplace, as massive quantities of goods, shipped by boat from Tombo, were loaded onto trucks destined for towns across the southern provinces: towns that, were it not for this lifeline, would have found themselves entirely under siege. For several years, the Shenge Highway, built to sustain the light traffic of a provincial town, became the busiest thoroughfare in Sierra Leone: 'This was the only way to the provinces: Moyamba, Bo, Kenema, Kailahun, Makeni. This was the *only* way you went there. Every day, every day, vehicles were coming, vehicles were going, vehicles were coming, vehicles were... just like that' (Pa Modu, elder, Shenge).

When the war ended, Shenge's market rapidly dwindled, leaving in its wake a road destroyed from overuse. Meanwhile, even as fresh migrants continue to relocate to the coast, this relentless intensification has come at a cost. Long gone are the boom times of the 1980s: the fishing grounds upon which this growing population depend for their subsistence are showing visible signs of strain. Certainly, I never witnessed anything resembling the scene described by Thomas Aldridge a century previously, when it had apparently been 'no uncommon thing to see the Sherbro water... boiling over, as it were, with immense shoals of moving fish, and when it is the season for the *bonga*... the sight is indeed extraordinary' (1910: 249).

Here, one of Patti's old-time Sherbro fishermen speaks with some bitterness of the fact that these newer fishing methods, which had once seemed to promise such riches, have in fact contributed to the longer-term trend of creeping impoverishment:

The fish we caught first time, we don't catch again. We caught loads! But now... the types of fishing; the types of fishing are too many. It is not like it was before... now they draw these sim-boat nets [and] the fish have nowhere to hide. Before, when people went out to the sea to fish, the fish could come up by the land here, to hide, because nobody disturbed them. Now, with these bad-bad fishing methods, even where they breed, people catch them. (Pa Brima, Patti)

As local fisherfolk are only too aware, the slump they are witnessing in the wealth of their coastal waters has also been caused, to a some extent, by powerful forces entirely beyond their control: by internationally owned 'pirate' trawlers, which enter Sierra Leone's poorly policed coastal waters to fish illegally (Ukwe *et al.* 2006; EJJ 2012).

The Sierra Leonean state, which had already been extremely fragile even before its infrastructure was shredded by civil war, has yet to fully recover from the violence of the 1990s. In places like Kagboro, which lack the infrastructure and political connections to attract outside investment, the grinding pace of post-war reconstruction is most acutely felt. Fishing towns on this coast continue to attract fresh migrants from rural areas. However, suffocated by a transport network so dilapidated and dangerous that the peninsula is sometimes almost completely cut off from the outside world, population growth has not translated into any proliferation in livelihood opportunities. Research in Sierra Leone, as elsewhere in Africa, is bifurcated. On one hand are the 'classic' village ethnographies, with their emphasis on the customary politics of kinship and secrecy; of powerful elders, and deeply entrenched lineage-based patterns of inequality (Ferme 2001; Leach 1994). At the other extreme, studies that explore the self-consciously cosmopolitan, unstable youth culture of the city seem to represent an almost entirely separate subdiscipline within Africanist anthropology (Hoffman 2007; Bolten 2008). As a town that is unquestionably remote and yet vividly in flux, Tisana's story offers the opportunity to unsettle these binaries; and, in doing so, to bridge an important gap in ethnographic discussions of this region (Fumanti and Rajak 2013).

2.3 Methods

I first arrived in Shenge-Tissana in March 2010, having spent a long, rather frustrating month travelling southern Sierra Leone, searching for a suitable field site. I was curious to explore the tensions and opportunities that emerged for those people who navigated their livelihoods at the margins between the ‘traditional’ rural economy of wealth-in-people, and a more urban, market-based economy, governed by quite different moral rules and measures of ‘profit’. However, finding a field site that enabled me to interrogate these questions proved rather more difficult than I had imagined. My original proposal had been to conduct a multisited ethnography, exploring the lives of the market women who shuttle back and forth between urban centres and rural villages, trading rice and palm oil. Bo Central Market, where I had initially thought I might base myself, turned out to be such a busy, densely woven labyrinth that there was barely space for a researcher to stand without getting in somebody’s way. Meanwhile, my tentative enquiries about where I might find ‘a village’ to base myself were met with understandable bemusement.

It was at this point I began to consider studying the economy of Sierra Leone’s third major staple food: dried fish. Precious little is written about the country’s fishing industry but, on the advice of my acquaintances in Bo, I made my way to Shenge. Arriving in town at the end of a long, dusty motorcycle ride, I was taken directly to the home of Kagboro’s newly appointed Paramount Chief, Madame Eleanor Mano. By an extraordinary twist of serendipity, ‘Mammy Ela’ had spent several years in my home city of Edinburgh, whilst her late husband completed a PhD in African history. Perhaps in part because of these surprising parallels between us, she was as enthusiastic and welcoming as one could dream a host might be. Within a matter of hours, I had been found a language teacher; a home in Shenge’s busy wharf town, Tissana, and, it seemed, the tentative beginnings of a doctoral project.

No fewer than five languages are commonly spoken in Tissana: Sherbro, Krio, Temne, Mende and Fula. For my first six months of fieldwork, I took Sherbro lessons most mornings with Pa Lunsar, who lived a couple of miles away in Dibia village, and was respected across Kagboro Chiefdom as the greatest authority on ‘Sherbro ways’. We worked our way through the colonial-era dictionary and grammar book that I brought with me, and he taught me the hymns and prayers that he had translated into Sherbro

for Shenge's church. I also took Krio lessons twice a week with Mr. Albert, who was a teacher at Shenge's high school and a prominent member of the chiefdom's ruling family.¹⁶ Although it doubtless helped to win me sympathy with my new neighbours, when they saw how hard I was trying to master a language that nowadays only a few tens of thousand Sierra Leoneans understand, in reality all my most interesting conversations were conducted in Krio. As the *lingua franca* in a highly polyglot community, Krio is nowadays far more widely spoken than the indigenous language of the Sherbro Coast. Fortunately, it also happens to be by far the easiest of local languages for an English speaker to master.

Perhaps of even greater importance than their help as language teachers, both Mr. Albert and, especially, Pa Lunsar taught me a huge amount about the politics and social history of Sherbroland. As time went on, our lessons shifted from grammar and vocabulary into long, winding conversations about social life across Kagboro Chiefdom. I continued to visit Pa Lunsar regularly long after we had stopped formally studying Sherbro together. He would often tell me stories of life in his family village, or help me to make sense of the dramas and disputes that had been taking place in Tissana. Although only a tiny fraction of this knowledge has made it directly into the chapters that follow, it provided much of the ground rock upon which this thesis is built.

As a second stroke of good fortune, the room I was given to lodge was in a large and wonderfully dynamic household. The owner of the house, George Thomas, had long since retired to Freetown and nowadays his once-grand compound is home to an eclectic, ever-fluctuating population of around thirty people — many of whom I came to count amongst my most valued informants. Jacob, who was Pa Thomas's nephew, was the caretaker of the compound, and a well-respected elder. It was he who was officially recognised as my guardian for as long as I stayed in Tissana. Aside from Jacob's immediate family and foster children, Site was also home to three unrelated elders, all of whom had lived in the compound since it was built in the late-1970s: Pa Bimbola, Mama Koni and Si Mary.

Around this core population, a steady flow of other people moved in and out of that large compound over the course of the eighteen months I lived there. Often these were

¹⁶ I paid Mr. Albert directly for each lesson. Pa Lunsar I gave more sporadic but larger gifts.

relatives, foster children or strangers, freshly arrived from villages inland. Just as commonly, local Tissanan women sought temporary refuge there, sometimes with their children in tow, following the breakdown of a relationship with their parents or partner. As a result, many of the people whom I came to know most closely were living through an important moment of personal transition. They often reflected openly with one another, and with me, on what had caused their previous relationships to collapse, or had prompted them to relocate and start a new life on the coast. Although the voices you will hear quoted in this thesis include a far greater cross-section of Tissana's population, the residents of Site strongly coloured my impression of life in this coastal town.

As soon as I was less busy with language lessons, my most immediate problem — as for many ethnographers, I suspect — was how to pass the time. I sometimes went dragnet fishing in the morning, rising early to go down to the beach and join the teams of men, women and children to wade, waist-deep into the sea, and spend the next couple of hours gradually drawing the long, arched fishing net up onto the shore. I went with the women in my compound to help in their gardens; and followed them along the coast when they went foraging for oysters in the mangrove swamps. I tried my hand at basket weaving, fish processing and fish-packing. But, in fact, a huge amount of the material in this thesis was gathered simply sitting on the busy back veranda of my own home, which ran like a corridor between the main building and the kitchen (see Figure 8). It was here that everybody gathered if they were at home, to talk or listen to the radio. The veranda also happened to straddle one of the busiest footpaths through town, so a near-constant trickle of pedestrians moved through that space each day; often pausing to rest for a while, to shelter from the weather and join the conversation.

Jacob's daughter, Buema, made laundry soap for a living, so every couple of weeks, after she had 'cooked' a new batch, I would be kept gratefully busy for a few days, perched on the floor grating kilos of soap into washing powder as the rolling drama of veranda life unfurled in front of me. When there was no soap left to grate, I devised another strategy for feigning busyness: crochet. Throughout my time in Tissana, I crocheted dozens of brightly patchworked baby blankets, food covers and children's clothes. This simple activity took the edge off the awkwardness I felt, simply 'hanging out' with no immediately evident purpose. There were a handful of other homes around Tissana where I learned to feel equally comfortable, and whose verandas were similarly

busy with a passing traffic of garrulous neighbours. The ‘vehicle park’, where traders packed their dried fish into crates ready for transport, was another good place to intercept people with idle time to talk (see Figure 15); and, on most days, I spent an hour or so on the beach, sitting with one of the various clusters of women who were gathered there, looking out to sea, awaiting the fishermen’s return.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I recorded about forty unstructured interviews — predominantly with older people. Initially, I relied on Jacob and Pa Lunsar to suggest people who were known for being particularly knowledgeable, or for having led especially interesting lives. In these cases, Jacob accompanied me to interviewees’ homes, to formally introduce me and explain my purpose. Although conversations very often veered onto other subjects, we always began by asking people to talk us through their life story — often with a particular focus on their story of migration to the coast, and their personal experience of economic change. Jacob is quatorlingual so, in cases where people were not confident Krio speakers (relatively common amongst the region’s oldest residents), he also translated back and forth between Sherbro, Krio and Temne. A well-respected and well-liked figure across coastal Kagboro, his presence went a long way to making the elders feel at ease, and had the added advantage of giving the interviews a relaxed, conversational flow.

Towards the end of my fieldwork I went back — alone this time — and recorded conversations with many of the neighbours whom I had grown to know best throughout my time in the town; particularly those people who I knew would enjoy the opportunity to talk. In these cases, I was already familiar with much of what was to emerge from the conversations; but it was an opportunity to capture people’s words and their opinions a little more precisely. Although I generally found people very happy to discuss their life experiences with me, I gave all interviewees the same small gift of cash — or ‘shakehand’ — as a gesture of respect, and to thank them for their time.

2.3.1 *Ethics and Positionality*

Adamse: When you get back from Bo, we’ll show you where the devils [spirits] are, in the rivers [... so] you can come back to catch them.

Me: *Catch them?* No, I don’t want to do that...

- Adamse: Eh? Why not? Don't you want money? You can trap them in a jar, and take them with you. Then you'll be rich! They've taken a lot of our devils now, the white people...
- Me: Why?
- Kumba: Well, devils, they have ideas that you and I don't have. So, when [... white people] want to make something, they ask their devil [how to do it...]. That's how your people can make so many things, like phones and ships and guns. It is we who have the devils. They are here in our land, but we can't catch them. And what can we make? Nothing.
- Me: You made your boat!
- Kumba: Ha! Just half-half things. We're just here, working in this fishing, nothing more.

As has often been noted, ethnographers can never stand in a purely neutral position, outside the communities we set out to study: 'What we call the outside position is a position within a larger political-historical complex' (Abu-Lughod 1991: 155). Across much of contemporary Africa, people's sense of their own poverty is heightened by the ever-greater global flow of information and an awareness of the material prosperity enjoyed in other parts of the world (Ferguson 1999: 47; Comaroff and Comaroff 1998).

For many in West Africa, encountering the world through the lens of a broader esoteric *episteme*, the disproportionate wealth of the 'white' world is assumed to derive from the power of Western 'secrets' (Bledsoe and Robey 1986: 217; cf. d'Azevedo 1962b: 30; Soares 2005: 133; Gable 1997). In Tissana, people occasionally suggested I might possess an innate ability to 'see' — and so to exploit — forces in the landscape that remained inaccessible to most of my neighbours. Similar powers of perception were credited to certain local people, too: amongst them, sorcerers, hunters, twins and 'witches'. However, viewed in the context of Kagboro's long, deeply problematic history of interaction with Europeans, the association between white skin and ambiguous power seemed (to me) to carry a particular weight of moral disquiet. One of the most influential ideas to have emerged in Sierra Leonean scholarship in recent years has been Rosalind Shaw's (2002) suggestion that the more violent aspects of Temne spiritual beliefs contain within them an embedded 'memory' of Atlantic slavery. Certainly

(although such an argument is almost impossible to substantiate) Kumba's claim that white people routinely seize Sierra Leonean spirits and transport them to Europe for profit would fit very neatly within Shaw's broader thesis.

Even if we keep our gaze in the more immediate historical moment, the more urgent problem for people in Tissana was that foreign-owned trawlers passed through Kagboro's waters covertly at night, illegally catching quantities of fish unimaginable to local fishermen (EJF 2012). Perhaps it is hardly surprising, then, that many people assumed my research activities to be underpinned by a similarly extractive logic. When I travelled around Kagboro Chieftdom or visited fishing communities even further afield, I would often be approached by people who had already heard of me, and had some sense of what I had come to do in Sherbroland: 'Oh, so you're the one who's come to steal our languages? When you take them home, they'll give you loads of money for them, is that not so?' The tone was always jovial, half-joking. Yet these encounters took place often enough for it to be clear that my activities had become the subject of considerable speculation around the chieftaincy.

I should stress that when my neighbours interrogated me about life in Europe, as they very often did, they were curious about far more than the reputedly lavish wealth of the Western world. Instead, they were playing with quite fine-grained models of how, they imagined, it might be possible for marriage, family life and business relationships to operate differently. In these conversations, Europeans were often cast as a rather idealised 'other': fairer, more honest, and less prone to witchcraft than their African counterparts. As Ira Bashkow has demonstrated beautifully in a Papua New Guinean context, such morally bifurcated images of the Western world do far more than simply reflect the injustices of the postcolonial order:

What is striking is the extent to which Orokaiva have constructed the Whiteman within their vernacular culture as an other that is morally charged and 'good to think with' about specifically local concerns... The methodological point is that... ultimately, we learn much more about the world of Orokaiva from their construction of Whiteman than we learn about white people. (Bashkow 2000: 322)

In this sense, my neighbours' reciprocal curiosity about 'white' society often proved a valuable methodological tool, for it led people to initiate conversations with me about the aspects of *their* own social order that they found most challenging or morally problematic. We were all of us involved in that very ethnographic process of trying to figure out how similar we were to one another, and how different.

Nonetheless, the fact that people sometimes likened my research to a form of *theft* brings into stark resolution the ethical cracks inherent in ethnographic research, and adds fresh weight to the problem of how I could 'fairly' reciprocate the considerable time, energy and generosity of the many people who helped me live and work in Tissana. My day-to-day experience of fieldwork was heavily shaped by the assumption, shared by all but a few of my very closest friends, that I must have been extraordinarily wealthy. It holds true of most ethnographers working in contexts in which the people around them are very poor that 'perhaps more than any other object, money gives initial shape to fieldwork relationships' (Senders and Truitt 2007: 2; cf. Truitt 2007). However, this rather uncomfortable dynamic becomes all the more salient for anthropologists like me, whose primary concern is to describe the 'morality' of everyday economic life.

The nature of ethnographic research is such that we learn what we know of other people's worlds only by entering into social relationships that are themselves inherently moral. What makes this experience most challenging — and, one might argue, most enlightening — is that anthropologists and their informants often begin with quite different expectations about what entails 'good' behaviour. In my own case, faced with an unfamiliar reality in which I could barely leave my room without being asked, very publicly and explicitly, for cash, I had no intuitive sense of what would be the 'correct' way of managing this barrage of requests.

Those myriad crocheted baby blankets that I distributed throughout Tissana were, in part, an attempt to 'moralise' my fieldwork relationships according to the logic of our own economic order. I wanted to demonstrate that I was willing and able to reciprocate the kindness shown to me, in a way that freed me of the uncomfortable sense my that friendships risked sliding into transactional relationships. However, as Bloch and Parry noted over two decades ago, the assumption that money necessarily signifies relationships 'that are inherently impersonal, transitory, amoral and calculating' (Bloch and Parry 1989: 9) is a peculiarity of Western economic thought. I came to accept only

slowly that, for my neighbours in Tissana, there was nothing contradictory about giving money as a gift expressive of sincere gratitude or affection (cf. Van Der Geest 1997).

Still, the problem remained: the sheer volume of demands made upon me each day far outstripped my resources. The anxiety this generated would have been familiar to almost all my neighbours. So, just as Michael Carrithers described his experience of ethnographic learning as one of allowing his 'whole person [to be] exposed and subjected to the judgments and corrections of others' (2005: 457), my own unresolved dilemmas about money, in the end, provided one of my most valuable windows into the anxiety-ridden experience of inhabiting Tissana's moral-economic order. If no one was able to give me definitive advice about when I could materially afford to give, and whom I could morally afford to refuse, it was because they were so often plagued by the same question. As I explore in the following chapter, a near-ubiquitous characteristic of life on the Kagboro Coast is for people to find their tight resources pulled upon by a seemingly impossible number of moral claims.

Chapter 3: Economic Runaways on Sierra Leone's Maritime Frontier

I was sitting one Sunday with Hawa, in front of the house that she and her husband shared with the two fishermen who worked in their boat: Ishmael and Kumba. As Hawa and I chatted, I was aware, from the corner of my eye, of Ishmael strolling back and forth around the house immersed in a long animated telephone conversation.

This was a common scene in Tissana on Sundays. For most of the week telephone credit was a costly resource to be eked out frugally across functional, staccato conversations. At the weekend, however, that changed: the telephone company ran an offer in which a small amount of credit could buy a full day's worth of uninterrupted airtime. In a town of migrants, this was a precious opportunity for people to connect with friends and relatives left behind in distant parts of the country.

Hearing him repeating the same excited greetings and requests for news, it was clear that, at the other end of the line, the phone was being passed around between various of Ishmael's family and former neighbours. After some time, Ishmael followed suit, handing his phone to Hawa: 'My sister wants to greet you!'

Hawa was a couple of minutes into her small-talk niceties with this woman she had never met — 'Yes, he is well. He is lodging with us... Yes, we are all well... Haha, it's true, we do eat a lot fine fish here!' — when, suddenly, a flash of panic crossed Ishmael's face. He rushed over to her, having remembered something urgent, and mouthed the words, '*Tell her I'm in Tombo!*' Hawa didn't flinch. Nodding silently, she followed his instructions: 'Yes, we are all here *in Tombo*, fishing... We are all very well here *in Tombo*'.

Afterwards, I asked why he had not wanted the caller to know where he was. 'It was my sister'. I must have looked confused because, after a moment's pause, he elaborated. 'If they know where I am, they'll all come and find me!'

'Does this mean she's going to go to Tombo now to find you?'

'Yes. Maybe'.

This short anecdote hints at a deep tension that runs as an undercurrent through almost every aspect of social life in Tissana. On one hand, there could be no doubting the depth of complexity and sincere affection that characterises family relationships here (as anywhere else). Yet there is also a palpable sense in which the long-term grinding material poverty endured by Sierra Leoneans has taught people to be mistrustful of the material obligations that arise, inevitably, from any close social bond. Whilst an important theme of this thesis¹⁷ will be to explore the material ways in which people work to 'become' related, the flip side to this dynamic is that many people invest at least as much energy attempting to resist absorption into onerous webs of relatedness.

Not only in Sierra Leone, but also across the world, fisherfolk are often associated with stereotypes of independence and unpredictability (Acheson 1981; Schoembucher 1988: 213; Seeley 2009). In this respect and others, the Yawri Bay's maritime economy seems to conform rather neatly with popular imaginaries of frontier regions: often presented somewhat romantically as lawless spaces, the wild unseen edges of the state that people retreat to in a conscious rejection of established authority¹⁸ (Scott 2009). In later chapters, I describe the ways in which the Yawri Bay's established fishermen migrate fluidly across their maritime topography; pausing to settle — sometimes for a few hours, sometimes several weeks or months — in one or other of the wharf towns that pepper the coasts of those fishing grounds.

My discussion in this chapter focuses on a quite different form of migration, and introduces a theme that will run as a thread throughout this entire thesis. Many

¹⁷ Especially Chapter 4, Potato Ropes.

¹⁸ As such, this chapter not only contributes to the (surprisingly small) anthropological literature on African fishing communities (Wyllie 1969; Jorion 1988; McGregor 2008; Nakayama 2008; Beuving 2010); it also sheds light on broader discussions about the economies of border zones and youthful 'boom towns' across the continent (Shipton 1989; De Boeck 1998; Werthmann 2003; Walsh 2003, 2009).

fisherfolk I knew had taken significant risks to change their lives by moving to the sea. The rapid growth of Sierra Leone's fishing economy — like that of its diamond towns, city slums, and erstwhile rebel armies — has been fuelled by a steady stream of poor rural migrants who, for at least the past three generations, have been choosing to abandon their farming villages to seek a new kind of livelihood, often reporting that they were forced to do so by the violently exploitative micropolitics of village life (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962).

James Scott has argued that many of the world's nomadic peoples, whose mobile lives skirt the fringes of national territories, could be described as 'maroon communities': runaways who had 'at one time or another, elected, as a political choice, to take their distance from the state' (2009: 8). Tissana offers an interesting slant on his argument. Most of the people I discuss in this chapter, who 'ran away' to become migratory fishermen in the Yawri Bay, did so from small farming communities in which they had already been living beyond the effective reach of the state (e.g. Ferme 2001: 20; Richards: 149). For these runaways, the most salient and problematic political forces in their lives operated at a much more local level: in the fraught micropolitics of individual households, lineages, villages and farms. Still, I will argue in this chapter that the broader point holds true: there *are* deliberately political elements to fishermen's subsistence routines, which could meaningfully be read as designed to 'maximize dispersion, mobility, and resistance to appropriation' (Scott 2009: 329).

My suggestion is that commercial wharf towns like Tissana evolved, in part, as a *refuge* from — and a conscious alternative to — the 'traditional' agrarian economy. As such, this discussion inverts one of the most familiar narratives of economic anthropology. For, far from being nostalgic for the lost morality of a pre-capitalist world, many people in Tissana entered this commercial world with the explicit hope of escaping a deeply embedded, 'traditional' economic system.

In the first section of this chapter I sketch an impression of economic life in 'the village' (*fakai-ko*), as it appeared when viewed from the coast, refracted through the memories of the people who chose to leave that world behind. After spending a few pages discussing material difficulties of eking out a subsistence from Kagboro's impoverished soils, I describe some of the ways landholding elders are able to control the labour of poorer client farmers. I end this section by reflecting on the depths of the tensions

inherent within this patronage system, by narrating the stories of several fishermen who, at different points in the past half-century, describe themselves as having ‘fled’ for safety to the Kagboro Coast.

In many cases, the greatest attraction of a life on the ocean was that it appeared to offer migrants a level of personal ‘freedom’ they could never have hoped to attain in their own home village. The emphasis in the second section of this chapter is to explore what it is about the kinds of economic relationships people form in Tissana, which appears to offer even the poorest young fishermen the hope of achieving personal independence. However, such dreams of economic ‘freedom’ are rarely more than fleetingly realised. The need for some semblance of material security, combined with familiar patterns of indebtedness and fosterage, consistently draw people back into binding networks of dependency relationships: relationships with a momentum toward becoming both a burden on people’s scant resources, and a limit on their liberty.

3.1 Economic Life in Tissana’s Hinterland

Whilst it is common for households in Tissana to keep small kitchen gardens, attempts to farm on a more serious scale are rare.¹⁹ The vast majority of households rely for their staple calorie intake on imported rice, hundreds of sackloads of which are brought each week by boat from Freetown, and sold on by the cupful by petty traders whose customers’ cash derives, by one route or another, from the commercial fishing economy. However, almost all Sherbro speakers along the Kagboro Coast have close family ties in one of the subsistence villages of the hinterland, and an intimate knowledge of life there.

The people I knew often stressed the extreme hardship endured by their relatives in remoter parts of the region who, unlike themselves, struggled to subsist without any regular source of cash income. During the rainy season, Tissana’s Sherbro-speaking residents added a new stock phrase to their standard exchange of greetings on the wharf. After asking one another whether they had heard from their respective relatives

¹⁹ Pa Modu, whom I discuss below, is a rare exception.

in ‘the village’²⁰ (*fakai-ko*), they would shake their head mournfully: ‘There’s hunger in the village-oh! They’re hungry there now’.

Sometimes in the village whatever you do, you will not be able to save enough to eat in the rainy season. You go half belly-full. If you are used to using ten cups [of rice] per day in the house, you have to cope on five cups, just to save enough to sow. (Pa Abdul, Tissana, formerly of Mompele Village)

The difficulty is not a shortage of land. Remoter parts of Sherbroland are, in fact, very sparsely populated. In Sierra Leone’s hot, wet climate, wild vegetation grows fast, but this tropical luxuriance can be misleading. Sherbro farmers are quick to complain that the sandy soils of their low-lying coastal region make inhospitable terrain for cultivating food crops. Describing the years she spent in her mother’s village, inland from Tissana, Buema recalled: ‘Life there’s hard, you know? They work and work and work and, with all that work, in the end, they can’t grow enough food... because the soil’s no good... People just can’t grow enough food’ (Buema, Tissana, formerly of Moyibo Village).

Pa Modu and his wife, Koni, were amongst the few people in Shenge who even attempted to be self-sufficient in rice. The first time he took me to visit his new farm, I began to appreciate the truth of Buema’s description of subsistence agriculture as a life of ‘work and work and work’. The land was so completely engulfed in thick, mature growth that it resembled, to my untrained eye, a plot of virgin rainforest. Modu and Koni were hoping to plant three bushels of rice that year but, whether or not this proved possible depended entirely on whether they were able to mobilise enough manpower to clear that dense bush.

Kagboro’s soil can typically support two rice harvests in a row. After that, farmers are reticent to plant again on the same area of land; anticipating that the ground will be so leached of nutrients that their harvest would drop below the amount of rice invested as seed. Common-sense farming wisdom decrees that land ought to be left fallow for at least fifteen years to recover between planting cycles. Pa Modu had waited even longer: well over two decades had passed since this land was last cleared. That long recovery period would, he hoped, be enough to ensure the fragile soils yielded a healthy crop, but

²⁰ The same generic term is used, in the collective singular, to refer to any and all villages, rather as anthropologists might talk to one another about “The Field”.

hacking through that dense bush would be an even more formidable task than usual. The amount of work was well beyond the physical limits of the ageing couple, their one tenant and three adult children. If they were to clear this land, then they were reliant upon cajoling the help of the young male members of Koni's extended family,²¹ fishermen who lived eight kilometres along the coast in Bendu.

The route from Bendu to Shenge passed my compound, so I joined the twenty or so young men as they strode the last leg of the bush path to their aunt's village, machetes swinging jauntily at their sides: an impressive turnout. Every other day, these men worked in the sea, so they approached their short excursion into heavy farm labour with an almost festive air of novelty. Two amongst them had been identified as captains and, as soon as they arrived at the bush, they set about dividing the rest of their peers between them: each captain taking turns to pick a team member, exactly as they might have done before a friendly football match. With everyone assigned a team, there was a flurry of competitive but good-natured posturing, a bet was laid as to which side would clear the most land before dinner and then, against the soundtrack of thwacking machetes and friendly bickering, the real work began:

'I am not saying with paddling [a boat]; but with this work, I leave you way behind!'

'Ah! You hear his nonsense? I taught that boy to brush [clear land]!'

For all their initial high spirits, by the end of a day hacking through thick tropical foliage under the scorching dry season sun, the men were exhausted. Koni and Modu paid their relatives the same small pocket money, food and cigarettes as would have been the going rate for day labourers inland. They could not have afforded to pay any more. But the truth is, these fishermen would never have agreed to work so hard, for so little, had it not been largely as a favour to two older relatives whom they held in high personal respect. And there are limits to the amount of hard labour that affection alone can buy. Koni was unable to persuade her nephews to return the following week. In the end, she and Modu were forced to resign themselves to a farm less than half the size they had hoped to sow.

²¹ Pa Modu's family lived too far away to help.

Worse still — as if in fulfilment of the gloomy prophecy I had so often been told — even those virgin soils yielded an extremely disappointing crop that year. Pa Modu and Koni had other sources of income: they ran a bakery from their home. For a subsistence farmer in a small village, the compound failure of a too small farm and a too low yield would have been disastrous. It is against this material environment — in which a huge amount of tough physical labour is required simply to coax the most basic subsistence from the land — that the strong bodies of young people become amongst the most coveted, and contested, resource in farming economies. Full-time farmers cannot afford to risk relying on the willing help of their young relatives. Instead, more coercive methods are often used to obligate young people to work.

Inland, they make very, very big farms — not like our little ones here. At this time of year [rainy season], you won't see anyone in the village except for old people. All day long, from dawn, they are there in the farm. They aren't able to rest until night-time. Then they sleep. (Giatu, formerly of Mompele village)

It is already evident that, when people in Tissana describe day-to-day life in small villages of the kind they or their immediate ancestors grew up in, these conversations rarely conjure a sense of nostalgia for those close-knit subsistence communities. In the eighteen months I spent living on the Kagboro Coast, I became familiar with a rather dystopian image of life in a 'traditional' Sherbro village. As I explore in the following section, these representations do far more than simply recognise the poverty of Sherbro soil: they extend, too, to a moral commentary on the patterns of rural inequality and labour exploitation.

In one direction, a maze-like tangle of swamps and tributaries spread east around the Kagboro inlet. Then, westward, a full day's paddle across the wide mouth of the Sherbro Estuary, lies the slender, sandy archipelago of Ndema Chiefdom. Like²² the original population of the Kagboro coastline, the inhabitants of these regions are largely sedentary, Sherbro-speaking subsistence fisher-farmers. Yet, for all their important shared heritage, these places were often represented by my neighbours as a stark — and in some respects even frightening — counterpoint to their image of Tissana as a place of increasing openness and cosmopolitanism. Unreachable by road and untouched

²² Although the waters around Ndema are at least as abundant as those of the Yawry Bay, the chiefdom is too remote to attract significant numbers of traders and has never developed the kind of commercial fishing economy that characterises the Kagboro coastline.

by mobile phone coverage, both Ndema and inner Kagboro are frequently mobilised in conversation as caricatures of ‘backwardness’: places where one still encounters barely disguised forms of domestic slavery and where cannibalism, witchcraft and other covert forms of violence are a constant imminent threat.

3.1.1 *Village Runaways*

I was planning to travel with my friend Buema to visit her mother’s village, Moyibo, in one of the poorest, least accessible corners of inner Kagboro. The day before leaving, Pa Lunsar, who had himself grown up in a village nearby, told me something of what I could expect to see there. The image he painted — of the extortionate relationship between landholding elders and the labourers who enable them to manage their large farms — reproduced a pattern I was familiar with from ethnographic accounts of this region, in which elders set bridewealth at levels impossible for poorer young men to pay. The regular fining of poor men for adultery (‘woman trouble’) maintains them in a perpetual state of dependency, often obliged to work their entire lives for their in-laws or other lenders (Ferme 2001: 81):

Wiser men, they use that trick: he may have five, eight, nine women, and maybe he doesn’t have any boys to work for him on his farm. So, if a boy falls in love with his wife, he will say to the boy, ‘The only thing you can do is work for me’. And the boy will do it. Whenever [the husband] has work, the young man will come. When you go to Moyibo, you will see it. (Pa Lunsar, elder)

Pa Lunsar’s parting prediction proved uncannily accurate. On the very day we arrived in Moyibo, Buema and I walked straight into a ‘woman trouble’ case being heard on the veranda of the chief’s house, overlooking the muddy banks of the Kagboro River. A middle-aged husband had summoned Baki, a handsome young man from his village, accusing him of having flirted with his teenage wife. Baki admitted to being in love with the married woman and — although no one suggested the two young people had actually touched one another — the elders agreed he should pay a fine of three hundred thousand leones (£50): a sum that, everybody present must have realised, he had no hope of being able to afford.

Baki now had a choice. He could either stay in his village, slogging on the farm of his love’s husband until such distant time as his debt was considered paid; or, as many have

chosen to do before him, he could leave home for the uncertain prospects of life as a ‘stranger’ in an unknown town. I should stress here that a great many young people take the first option, and remain where they are — embedded in tight networks of social relationships that, however riddled with ambivalences they might be, are also fundamental to their constitution as a social person. Indeed, perhaps the most surprising thing for me, watching that court case as it unfolded in Moyibo, had been the anticlimactic way in which it ended. After the elders’ harsh ruling, all three people — the young woman, her husband, and his lovestruck debtor — left with polite smiles and handshakes and climbed back into a single canoe to paddle back to their tiny village together.

However tempting it is to view Baki’s hearing as *nothing* but a cynical strategy to extort his labour, Pa Lunsar reminded me that the personal tensions that riddle these tightly integrated rural communities are more real — and, potentially at least, more dangerous — than could be captured by such a straightforwardly functionalist model:

Other men [who are married to young girls], they will *hate* these boys. They will just hate that boy because he is trying to make something of himself. And any time there is a palaver, they will make sure he is penalised to the maximum.

Sometimes, the boy will die. He might fall from a palm tree. Or get a snake bite.

With his allusions to snake bites and fatal accidents, the point Pa Lunsar is making is that a young man like Baki would have good reason to fear being attacked by the jealous older man, using one of the various *ifohn wei* (‘bad medicines’) that circulate through Kagboro’s covert economy. Indeed, back in Tissana, one thing that struck me, as I began gathering the stories of men who had taken the second option and chosen to sever their ties with their family village, was how many recalled the journey from home not as a cool-headed economic decision, but rather as a flight from physical danger.

Even Ba Kpana — who was, by most people’s reckonings, the oldest living resident of the Kagboro Coast — had first arrived on these shores an exhausted, isolated young man, fleeing a home in which he no longer felt safe. Like many subsequent generations of fishermen²³ in the towns around Shenge, Ba Kpana had grown up on one of the tiny, low-lying sandy islands of the Ndema archipelago. Over sixty years had passed since he first made that long, lonely canoe voyage, but now, sitting on the veranda of his Shenge

²³ But almost none of the women.

home with Jacob and me, he had no difficulty conjuring the dramatic events that had prompted his younger self to flee his family's village.

Kpana's father had died when he was a teenager, and left him to live with his uncle. It was his uncle who had found a wife for him, and who had paid the dowry on his behalf. After the couple were married, they continued to live in their patron's large household, as — or so Ba Kpana phrased it to me — his 'children' (*apuma*). The paternal relationship was not nearly as benign as that term might imply, however, as he explains in a bit more detail here:

When we were in Ndema, we would fish and farm for our parents (*ba hi*) for the whole year... Our 'parents' would sell the fish and take it to Bo, Pujehum... But we would never see the money. All they would give us was food... They arranged everything for us... Even though we were fully-grown, we were there under 'parental care'. You and your wife are just labourers (*noh haa mpanth*); just workers under your parents. You don't know what happens to the money. That's why they just go and find a wife for you. They choose the woman and pay the dowry, and then you both work for them. You work and work and work and you will not earn money. If they see any money with you — even one cent — they will beat you and call you a thief.

Throughout this conversation, no one made any insulting reference to slavery (*wono*), but the connection would have been obvious to anyone listening. Domestic slavery was only officially outlawed by the British colonial regime in 1928, following a period of several centuries in which it had been integral to the ways in which families, marriages, farms and villages were organised. If ever I asked people directly what they knew of the history of domestic slavery, one of the most common responses was to claim that 'yes, in Ndema [or upriver], they still have that style today'. From my own standpoint in Tissana, it was impossible to judge the extent to which my neighbours were exaggerating when they suggested *nothing* had changed in the remotest corners of Sherbroland. Certainly, it has been suggested often enough by ethnographers focusing on farming villages elsewhere in the region that, when domestic slavery was formally abolished, the same models for understanding and mobilising social power did not disappear so much as become reframed within expanded categories of kinship,

clientship and patronage (Ferme 2001: 171-2; Richards 2005; Fanthorpe 2006; Knörr and Filho 2010; Peters 2010).

In either case, what we are beginning to get a sense of are the subtle ways in which notions of paternal care, familial love and exploitation were apt to bleed into one another within the political economy of historical Sherbro villages. At least in this respect, there have been clear continuities from historical times up to the present day. In contexts where it seemed to shave a little too close to the truth, likening a person to a 'slave' remains one of the cruellest insults available, in either the Krio or the Sherbro language. For example, as we got to know one another better, Jacob would often confide in me his mounting private frustrations with his lifelong client relationship with his 'uncle', George Thomas, the former politician who owned the once grand compound that we all lived in and that Jacob worked hard to maintain. He had never been paid for this work and increasingly, after long years spent waiting in vain to be rewarded for his loyalty, he was finally beginning to lose patience. Increasingly, he viewed his relationship with his uncle as one of exploitation; but could see no way of extricating himself from it. So, when one of my fellow lodgers made the mistake of publicly calling Jacob 'a slave' in the heat of an argument, the slur was simply too offensive to be tolerated. With the Paramount Chief's consultation and full approval, the lodger — a policeman stationed in Tissana from elsewhere in Sierra Leone — was evicted from the house the very next day, along with his entire family.

This complex blend of affection, exploitation, dependence and power goes some way to explaining why, despite the extreme conditions he and his wife were living under in Ndema, Ba Kpana stressed that he had not ever chosen to sever the ties with his patron. Rather, his position as a dependent member of his household had suddenly become untenable, when one of his uncle's sons had died and Kpana fell under suspicion:

My uncle summoned me in secret and said, 'Look. For me, I have no problem with you. But my wife is cooking for us, [and she believes you killed her son], so I don't know what intentions she has for you [she might poison you...] Go! Go and hide yourself!'

I didn't stop. I went straight to my canoe, and paddled all night, until I came to Shenge. When I got here, I met with the elders in Shenge. The Ndema people who were here already introduced me as their guest.

Ba Kpana's story resonated strongly with Jacob, whose father had run away from his own village some thirty years later, and — according to family history — under a similar threat of imminent danger:

He found his cousin's canoe — a boy he used to go to sea with — abandoned, all covered in blood. He grew very afraid! He just paddled, paddled, paddled all the way to Shenge, in the dark. He never went back there until he died. Even when his family called him, he'd just say, 'Yes, I'm coming, I'm coming!' But he never went.

Nowadays, there is a weekly *pampa* (a slow, motorised passenger canoe), between Ndema and Kagboro but, at the time that these two young fishermen each made their night-time getaway, there had been almost no direct communication between the two chiefdoms. 'When we were young, we did not know that such a place as Ndema existed', Mr. Dumont, a middle-aged schoolteacher had once told me. And yet, as Ba Kpana's account makes clear, when he arrived in the 1940s he had met a community of émigré fishermen already established on the foreign coastline: part of a steady trickle of young men, all of whom had been desperate enough to escape close family relationships, which they can come to view as hostile, that they were prepared to risk a long journey into the complete unknown.

Sometimes, Ndema men would arrive, paddling. But they seemed to come from a very, very distant place, with their strange [dialect of] Sherbro. Maybe a young man would run away from his village. Even now, this is happening. Sometimes young men will be killed for woman trouble. And most of these Ndema boys who are coming here, it is for this: either for women or [for fear they will become the victim of] cannibalism. Even now, they are coming. (Mr. Dumont, Shenge)

The marine migration route from Ndema to the Kagboro Coast is travelled almost exclusively by me, but Tissana is far from being a predominantly 'male' space. Although it is also common for women to leave their landlocked villages in search of an alternative livelihood on the sea, this *narrative* of liberation through migration is an overwhelmingly male one. In my experience, female migrants are far less likely to describe their move as one of radical rupture, and far more likely to emphasise their continuing connectedness

with family networks left behind. These rhetorical differences map onto wider gendered expectations about how young people in Sierra Leone ‘come of age’.

Narratives of ‘running away from home’ have come to occupy a central place in constructions of rural masculinity, and reappear in various guises throughout the ethnohistorical record. For decades, commentators have been reporting that the poorest young men were choosing to leave their villages, hoping to escape the harsh physical labour and sexual constraints that characterised their lives there, and pursuing the promise of freedom and social mobility in cities and diamond-mining towns (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962; Little 1967 [1951]; Ferme 2001). As we saw in Chapter 1, the theme of ‘intergenerational’²⁴ tension between young men and male elders has been revisited in recent years with added urgency. Since the war, it has become common to argue that many young fighters were first driven from their home villages, and into one or other of the armed factions, by their anger at the ways in which local landholders were able to control their labour (Richards 2005; Fanthorpe 2006; Knörr and Filho 2010; Peters 2010). The narratives that these authors gathered amongst retired rebel fighters bear striking resemblance to the stories I encountered amongst émigré fishermen, circulating around themes of poverty, forced labour and ‘woman trouble’.

Viewed against this existing literature, perhaps the most surprising story I encountered from any village runaway was that of Moses Bundu, who had made the seemingly unusual decision of exiling himself from a home village in which he had been amongst the wealthiest patrons:

Any bush you could see [around the village], it was my father who owned all that land. So I used to farm. I’d prepare two farms — big farms! I’d plant ten to fifteen bushels [of rice] in each. I’d grow groundnuts. I’d plant pepper...

Clearing an area of land that size is a massive undertaking, and would have required him to mobilise a serious amount of labour in his village. You might recall that, back in Shenge, Pa Modu and Koni had failed to recruit enough workers to clear a farm one-tenth that size. Yet, for all his evident social power, Moses recalls the experience of being a local big-man as one of unbearable anxiety:

²⁴ Whilst societies in this region are often described as ‘gerontocratic’, this is rather too literal an interpretation of a local idiom that obfuscates patronage relationships behind the language of ‘parental care’ (cf. Murphy 1980: 202).

The way conditions were with me in my village, it was so bad... My people fought me, together, as a family. You know, on our native side, we have that — how do you say it? — that *hateness*, that hateful jealous mind. They use that bad-bad business [*ifohn wei*], so that they can spoil your life.

When Moses became seriously ill, he was certain it was as a result of an attempt, by members of his own family, to destroy him. ‘I scatter-scattered all my seven children to live with different brothers and sisters... [then] I left, without saying goodbye to anyone. That was 1984. I’ve never been back.’

The fact that migrants should so often emphasise the imminent physical danger of the moment in which they opted to leave home is important for several reasons. Firstly, as we will continue to see throughout this chapter, there is nothing unusual in the way émigrés conflate overt economic tensions — over labour, land and debt — with more embodied, if more covert, forms of violence: whether poisoning, witchcraft, fetish medicine or ‘cannibalistic’ murder. The easy way in which people’s explanations slide back and forth between these two apparently distinct spheres of material life points to a much broader characteristic of social life in this region. Here, the human body is not (only) fertile ground for constructing metaphors and moral narratives *about* economics. The various strategies by which people set out to influence one another’s bodies are themselves a constituent element of the everyday economic order.

Secondly, it is striking that not only former tenant farmers, but also their former patrons should remember village economic life as riddled with potentially fearful animosity. In this sense, my data appear to support William Murphy’s suggestion that the moral economy of patronage and dependency is also, inherently, ‘a moral economy of violence and punishment (or rebellion), as dependants can be accused of failures in loyalty and gratitude to patrimonial dispensation, and rulers can be faulted for failures in protection and support — as well as excessive extraction of tribute and labour’ (2010: 42). Although the details of their accounts differ, both Ba Kpana and Moses experienced their closest personal relationships rapidly transforming into their greatest source of fear. In both men’s stories what is taken for granted is that intimacy, animosity, exploitation and risk are often facets of the same relationship. Discussions in the post-war period have (quite rightly) focused on working to understand the anger of the marginalised young men who eventually became fighters. The broader point to stress is that, when an economy is stretched to its breaking point, the tensions inherent within households and

dependency relationships often become the clearest focal point for these frustrations (Schoepf and Schoepf 1988; Bolten 2008).

Still, by narrating their departure from their ancestral village as a flight from mortal danger, émigrés are also emphasising the fact that they would not, under any normal circumstances, have left. For people growing up in such tightly integrated sedentary villages, it is a radical move to sever the familial ties that had, up to that point, been the very basis of their social identity. It is not without good reason that rural Sierra Leoneans might be extremely wary of the prospect of beginning a new life alone, a ‘stranger’ in another land.

One of the most intriguing things about the high level of immigration into the fishing economy is that, throughout rural Sierra Leone, ‘strangers’ have long been structured as the archetype of poverty and vulnerability; closely associated, in fact, to the historical figure of the domestic slave (d’Azevedo 1962b, 1962a; Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962). In Sherbro farming villages, as elsewhere in Sierra Leone, access to land is controlled by a few key members of important local lineages: those people, in short, who are able to claim the longest ancestry in the region. In subsistence communities, where land lies at the very basis of every person’s basic livelihood, this structures immigrants in a permanent state of dependency, wholly reliant for their subsistence upon the goodwill of the landlord and ‘father figure’ who agrees to grant them the means to grow food.

And, as we have already seen, wherever one encounters idioms of ‘parental care’ used to describe a relationship between two adults, it suggests a situation in which patrons have the potential (at least) to exert extraordinary control over their dependants’ lives. Hardly surprising, then, that people might feel wary to leave even the most difficult circumstances in their family homes, if the alternative they imagine for themselves is a life in which being a ‘stranger’ only guarantees rapid reintegration into new kinship structures: once more under ‘parental care’, but this time more vulnerable to exploitation than before. As I explore in the following section, however, there are various reasons why a young migrant arriving in Tissana might feel rather more optimistic than this model suggests.

3.2 Seeking ‘Freedom’ on the Sea

If we rejoin Ba Kpana’s story now, we will see that — even back in the 1940s — his experience of settling on the Kagboro Coast had not been characterised by a move into new forms of dependency:

When I reached Kagboro, I found the same system — because the people in Ndema and the people here are the same people. We are all Sherbros. There were no vehicles in Shenge at that time, and not many Temnes yet. But for me, here, life was better, because I was not under parental care. I could fish for myself! (Ba Kpana)

By Ba Kpana’s own account, social life on his adoptive Kagboro Coast had not, inherently, been very different from the Ndema archipelago he had left behind. Indeed, here is another of Tissana’s oldest living residents, Mi Yoki, remembering her own youth in Tissana, when it, too, had been a tiny, near-subsistence fisher-farmer hamlet:

You had to work for your *ba hi* [‘parents’]. You would never dare ask for money. You wouldn’t even dream it. The only thing you could ask for — and, in fact, you would not even ask for it — is food. They would not even give you clothes. You might be twenty before you have anything to wear.

Yet, Ba Kpana’s personal experience was that, *as a stranger* in Tissana, unburdened by the debts and obligations of family life, he found himself far more independent than he could ever have hoped to be in his ancestral home. For the first time in his life, he was able to sell his own catch to his own customers and do exactly what he pleased with his small profit.

As I explore throughout the remaining part of this chapter, Ba Kpana’s seemingly simple observation captures a tension that has continued in Tissana, through all the radical socio-economic changes of the intervening decades. Up to this day, much of the town’s social life is played out at the interface between two quite different models of moral economy. Firstly, as we will see, there are various reasons why newcomers arrive in Tissana, hoping the maritime economy might offer the kind of personal freedom that would have been unthinkable in a subsistence farming village. Yet, as we will see, the longer anyone remains in Tissana, this initial impression of the town as a place of

'freedom' has a tendency to wear thin. In an economy as tight as Tissana's, networks of social relationships (*subabu*) remain the only viable form of material security.

The old, land-based models of patrimonial power fail to translate smoothly into the Yawri Bay's commercial fishing economy. The real source of wealth and prestige in a town like Tissana has, for generations now, depended not on land rights but on boat ownership, and, unlike land, there are no customary regulations or patterns of inheritance to keep this kind of property restricted within certain high-ranking lineages. As the commercial fish trade has steadily intensified over the last few decades, Tissana's economy is nowadays so squarely oriented towards the sea that an individual's ability to claim deep ancestral roots on the Kagboro Coast is of ever-diminishing material relevance to their ability to become a wealthy or respected person.

This dramatic shift in patterns of regional power appears to have contributed to an equally radical shift in people's understanding of the relationship between history and place. So, whereas classic accounts of social life on the Upper Guinea Coast describe a people preoccupied with accessing and manipulating powerful, half-hidden knowledge of the past (d'Azevedo 1962b; Ferme 2001), my experience in Tissana was that ancestors appeared to be sliding out of the centre stage of social life altogether. Older residents could tell me, in minute detail, about the various public²⁵ occasions on which they were supposed to pour libation to their ancestors, but the reality is that I never once saw anyone actually performing these rituals.

One result of this truncation of historical time is that it has radically eroded the distinction between locals and strangers. *Certain kinds of immigrants* are able to thrive perfectly well in Tissana, without even the most nominal patronage of a local big man. Following in Ba Kpana's wake, a steady stream of young fishermen continue to make their way, by canoe, across the Sherbro Estuary from Ndema to settle on the Kagboro Coast. Nowadays, a whole section of Tissana is dominated by these Ndema migrants:

Yes, they still come! It is only men who come: they meet Kagboro women here. [They come] because they want to change their environment. When they are over there, they are in a hole. It is something like a hole. Here in Kagboro, it is

²⁵ I am not in a position to comment on the rituals that take place within secret society bushes, which may involve ancestors.

more advanced. You are closer to Moyamba and Freetown and other places. You gain experiences. (Pa Brima, Tissana)

In common with fishing towns elsewhere in Africa, Tissana is at once remote and surprisingly ‘urban’ in its social character (cf. Beuving 2010: 243). For a start, its population — like that of larger urban centres — is visibly dominated by young migrants. Immersed, often for the first time, in a diverse multi-ethnic peer group, newcomers from small villages relish the vibrancy, camaraderie and open flirtation that characterise social life on the wharf, far from the familiar watchful gaze of village elders. ‘Here, there is cinema, there are bars, there are jams [dance parties]. They meet interesting people. Here, people know how to speak Krio, they know how to dress well. Those things do not exist in the village. Those things change people’s lives!’ (Timbo, town chief).

So, quite aside from its location at the edge of a fragile state’s territory, Tissana is a ‘frontier town’ in the sense described by De Boeck. It sits on a sociocultural frontier, at the interface between two quite different ways of life: “‘rural” and “urban”... “traditions” and “modern” categories, practices, mentalities, relationships and belief systems’ (De Boeck 2001: 559; cf. Walsh 2003). The porosity and fluidity of Tissana’s social networks often bear a striking resemblance to those described in the informal economies of African cities (Simone 2005). This is a world in which marriages are typically informal and unstable; friends and customers are apt to leave town with little warning; even children move between households with surprising frequency.

And yet, for all the potential insecurity of their new life surrounded by strangers, I am not the first ethnographer to note that for many rural migrants into frontier towns, the greatest appeal of their adoptive home is precisely this metropolitan promise: of a life liberated from stifling kinship structures (Beuving 2010; Walsh 2003).

3.2.1 *Freedom, the Market, and ‘Living in the Moment’*

Although he was writing well over a century ago, Georg Simmel’s reflections on the *Philosophy of Money* (1978 [1900]) capture a moral ambivalence that still runs deep in the Western world view today. He argued that, whereas the gift of a specific object creates an ongoing reciprocal bond between giver and receiver, the empty and indifferent character of money acts instead to create a sense of neutrality and distance between

exchange partners. Until the 1980s, the prevailing tendency amongst anthropologists had been to focus on the purely negative aspects of that shift: lamenting the corrosive force of the market, as it eroded the specificity of local economic arrangements.

We saw in Chapter 1 that, since the 1980s, repeated moves have been made to complicate a set of rather moralised binary models of economic life, which had become hackneyed through overuse (Bloch and Parry 1989; Browne 2009). It is by now well documented that so-called ‘amoral’ market economies are invariably permeated with ‘gift-like’ relations (Rajak 2011; Dolan and Rajak 2011). West Africanists have been particularly vocal in the move to ‘rehabilitate’ money’s reputation, illustrating that cash need not necessarily corrode social relations, but, on the contrary, is often regarded as inseparable from, and constitutive of, love, respect and social personhood (e.g. Cornwall 2002; Van Der Geest 1997; Barber 1995).

Less often acknowledged is the possibility that, for some people, in some contexts, severing social relations might be exactly what they want, and that herein lies the greatest appeal of an economic life characterised by transactability. Simmel himself had been well aware that economic alienation was not entirely without attractions:

In as much as interests are focused on money... the individual will develop the tendency and feeling of independent importance in relation to the social whole... since he is free to take up business relations and co-operation wherever he likes; modern man is free – free because he can sell everything, and free because he can buy everything. (1978 [1900]: 343, 404)

Still now, as in Ba Kpana’s times, Tissana’s newest arrivals revel in the freedom that comes from their newly disembedded status. Removed from the debts and family obligations that had characterised their lives at home, here they are able to sell their catch to whomsoever they please, and spend (or indeed waste) their small cash exactly as they like: ‘Ha! Those Ndema fishermen — they enjoy their catch-oh! If they catch plenty fish one day, the next day they just blow [relax]! They don’t go to sea again until they run out of fish’ (Fatti, petty trader, Tissana). Such an apparently wilful lack of interest in pursuing material profit was regarded with something between admiration and frustration by their neighbours more established on this coast. The Krio verb ‘enjoy’ is a loaded one, and tends to be used in Tissana in a way that implies overtones of

immaturity, selfishness or lack of foresight. Those connotations are made more explicit by Marie in the following quote, as she jokingly explains why she would never want her relationship with her Ndema fisherman boyfriend, Asana, to evolve into anything more than a casual love affair:

Argh, that man! You see how he bluffs [swaggers]! That boyfriend of mine: when he gets a good catch, he just kicks back and bluffs! You see how he walks. He struts! He bounces! He eats fine fish. He enjoys himself till all his fish is done. Only then, he goes back to sea. Tissana men are different. Tissana men work! They'd even sell their fine fish and eat those cheap-cheap ones, just to make money.

Marie had a point. I would often bump into Asana strolling unhurriedly around town: the two of us conspicuous, in the busy throng of Tissana's economy, for the unreasonable amount of leisure time we appeared to have. And, whilst I spent much of my time guiltily feigning busyness, Asana did nothing of the kind. If ever I asked what he was doing, he would reply, with a sparkle in his eye: 'Nothing!'

Ndema fishermen's seemingly deliberate disinterest in accumulating material wealth can be viewed as one element of the broader 'frontier' mentality with which many new migrants approach their adoptive life in Tissana. If dominant, sedentary notions of economic responsibility typically require people to carefully manage their resources and plan for their future, Day *et al.* (1999) observed that marginalised groups, living on the edges of society, often take exactly the opposite approach: opting instead to live instead defiantly 'in the moment' — even when to do so may come at a cost to their already tenuous material security. By eschewing institutions such as the household that 'organise long-term social reproduction and, simultaneously, produce hierarchical relationships', the argument goes that marginal people's *aspirations* to freedom and autonomy come to be 'defined precisely by their monetary characteristics — which refuse to be caught in any framework outside their fleeting performance' (1999: 2).

Applying this argument to another 'frontier' economy — this time a Malagasy sapphire-mining town — Andrew Walsh emphasises the creative performativity with which the miners enact their disdain for money. By visibly 'daring' to consume their earnings on fleeting pleasures, with little regard for their uncertain future, these marginal young men are, he argues, taking part in a wider public performance of defiance, against a

world in which they otherwise have negligible power: ‘establishing for themselves and, in some cases, for others around them, their mastery of those things that might master them’ (2003: 292). Here, we see clear echoes of Richard Wilk’s survey of the ‘binge’ economies that emerge in towns frequented by male gang labourers. He, too, emphasises the theatrical machismo of economies in which, for the limited periods they had access to money or opportunities to spend it, these poor men often ‘competed to get rid of it in elaborate ways’ (2007: 19).

In fishing economies, like mining ones, wealth arrives in staccato, unpredictable bursts — and, here, too, fishermen often describe themselves as incapable of or resistant to saving money for the future (cf. Astuti 1999). However, whilst Walsh emphasises the creative performativity of ‘daring’ economic lives, this boat owner reminds us there is rather more at stake as a result of a person’s economic choices than the language of ‘performance’ suggests:

He [a single man] will make a lot of money and spend it! But the women don't. They are thinking about the problems of educating their children — medical problems are there. . . So women don't spend money like that. They are very, very careful. But men just burn their money! They think, ‘Tomorrow, I will go to sea and get a good catch and come again’. But the women see [that] this money needs to be controlled. (Sumana, boat owner)

Far from exhibiting any disdain for money *per se*, the people I knew in Tissana were wary of the expensive relationships one tends to become embroiled in the moment one sets out to accumulate it.²⁶ In Tissana, cash was neither made nor squandered with sufficient fervour to be labelled a ‘binge economy’ in the sense described by Wilk and Walsh. And yet, there is an important respect in which the town’s economy *is* located far more squarely ‘in the present moment’ than we have come to expect of communities elsewhere on the Upper Guinea Coast. Looking backwards, a creeping disinterest in genealogy is made evident by the gradual disappearance of ancestors from the lived landscape of the Kagboro Coast. Thus freed ‘from the burden of the past’ (Astuti 1999:

²⁶ The discussion I develop here could be read as a critique of Parker Shipton’s argument, that neophyte gold-miners were driven to spend their cash with seemingly reckless speed because gold (and so, too, the money associated with it) was tainted with cultural associations of pollution which rendered it dangerous for long-term investment (Shipton 1989; Werthmann 2003).

84), there is an equally widespread acceptance that the marriages and households of today will rarely turn out to be more than a provisional arrangement.

When we allow for the possibility there might be an element of deliberate political resistance in young men's decisions to 'live in the moment', this adds a quite different perspective to the clichés I often heard repeated about fishermen: that, even if they make a lot of money, they will prefer to invest their windfall in a new boat than an improved home; always half-ready to up anchor and relocate to a different wharf (and a different wife). Just as Day *et al.* might have predicted, both expressions of 'timelessness' are concerned with sidelining once-powerful institutions for organising long-term social reproduction. So when fishermen opt to 'enjoy their catch' rather than thinking of the future, this is a deeply ambivalent assertion of independence: at once a statement of autonomy and an abandonment of responsibility.

The fact is, for all the relative freedom experienced by newcomers to this coast, this is a world in which even the slightest perceived accumulation of material wealth is apt to transform itself rapidly into a sticky web of material demands from one's neighbours and relatives. As a lifelong resident of Tissana, and the head of a large, complex household, Jacob's experience of the town was completely different from that of the newly arrived, seemingly carefree Asana. With a network of relatives spread wide throughout the entire town, Jacob was well known and well respected. However, as this excerpt from my field notes demonstrates, none of this 'prestige' gave him any particular comfort when faced with the constant barrage of demands made upon him each day by his extended family:

Jacob's great-aunt, Mi Yoki, came to the back veranda looking for him. A couple of moments later, as I walked towards my room, I heard an urgent whisper: 'Jenny. Ssss! Jenny! Lock the door. Lock this door, please!' Jacob was pressed against the wall, around the front of the house, 'Problems, problems, problems! Is Mi Yoki there? She is coming to ask me for money...'

'Well', he told me later, after the coast was clear, 'that's what we're like here. They know I have nothing, but they will find a reason to ask. Especially now, because they see you [a white and, presumably, wealthy person] here with me.'

‘Konima left today, to go to her sister’s Bundu ceremony,’ the next conversation began, innocuously enough. ‘You see that? More problems! Problems, problems, problems... She knocked on my door saying, “OK, I am going now!”’, so I just had to dig into that money and give her something. That is how we are here. The only reason you would say goodbye to someone is to let them give you something.’

So many of his neighbours felt entitled to make these kinds of small, daily claims upon him that Jacob experienced his life as a constant losing battle to retain some limited personal control over his scant material resources. He would have sympathised, then, with Ishmael, whom we met in the introductory paragraphs of this chapter, giving a false address to his sister. Not being in the position to employ any such radical evasion technique, Jacob nonetheless invested much of his energy in the ultimately futile work of attempting to avoid his many suppliants.

It is hard to imagine a sharper contrast to the situation described by Melissa Leach in the Gola Forest twenty years previously, where, although ‘wealth differentials now exist only within generalised poverty’ (1994: 185), anyone with spare cash tended to be very eager to lend it to their neighbours. As one man explained to her, ‘I would not want you to have more money than me; instead, I want to have more money than you so that you are always coming to me and asking for things’ (ibid: 187). It remains the case in Tissana, as in farming regions that we would expect financial debt to translate into ties of social dependency and political loyalty. What is much more debatable is whether non-farming households have much to gain from accumulating large numbers of people. In a town where everything costs money, dependants are expensive.

Yet, even whilst struggling to live up to the impossible expectations placed upon him by his kin and neighbours, he was equally frustrated that his own *subabu* (social network) failed, in a similar way, to provide for him (cf. Bolten 2008). His sister, Sento, happened to own one of Tissana’s largest boats, and to run one of its busiest *bandas*. It was a cause of considerable bitterness amongst the members of our household that she had not done more to help her immediate family. For her part, Sento spent her days fielding her own inexhaustible barrage of suppliants from every corner of town; but this did

nothing to prevent her name being cited, in conversations around our compound, as an arch-villain of sorts. Here, Buema is speaking in the immediate aftermath of her latest failed attempt to beg money from her aunt:

As I was sitting there, another woman came along, who is not even family... and asked her for 350,000 leones to buy [produce to sell]. And, I swear to God, Sento went inside and counted that money and came out and gave it to the woman. In front of me! This is how she treats me, Jenny... she will help this other woman and she won't help me, her own family. And she won't help her brother, Jacob, either.

When my sister died, when you were in England just now, I went to their compound to tell my auntie she had died. Do you know what Frank [her husband] told me? Straight away? I didn't ask her for anything... He said, 'Every man has his load to carry! That's your problem! That's not our problem!' You see that? I didn't ask her for anything, I didn't go to her for help. I just went to tell her, nothing more. Those people — their hearts are black.

Without wanting to undermine the importance of a post-war project that has sought, as its first priority, to understand the anger of the young farmers who became fighters, what Buema, Jacob and Sento's stories reveal is that models of peacetime life, which *only* emphasise top-down exploitation by patrons of their clients, fail to do justice to the multiple material tensions that riddle communities in which even the so-called 'wealthy elders' are often struggling at the very edge of subsistence.

So, even whilst criticising the irresponsibility of men like Asana, Tissana's more established residents also recognised, possibly even envied, the assertion of personal liberty these newly arrived young migrant fishermen were able to make in their defiantly short-term livelihood patterns. Even as streams of migrants arrived in Tissana from their villages each year, Jacob would occasionally tell me, wistfully, that he dreamed of making the journey in the opposite direction, and relocating to Ndema: away from Pa Thomas's ever-disappointing patronage; away from the unrelenting stream of needy relatives, begging him for help; away from the sinister presence of his successful but seemingly ungenerous sister.

We will see in more detail over the following two chapters that, the longer they remained in town, migrant fishermen invariably do marry local women, develop long-term customer relationships, take loans that need to be repaid, and generally find themselves re-entangled in lattices of responsibility that belie any aspiration for complete, unattached independence. If he stays in this town long enough then, whether he wants it or not, it is likely only a matter of time before Asana will also find himself attempting to dodge a steady flow of neighbours, knocking hopefully on his door. In the meantime, however, his deliberate avoidance of family commitments, and his defiantly relaxed labour-rhythm, could hardly have stood in more stark opposition to the patterns of familial obligation that had shaped their labour when at home under ‘parental care’.

3.3 The Tenacity of Exploitative Power Relations

As we are beginning to see, this is a town in which successive waves of immigrants have worked to create an alternative economic order to the one left behind: an alternative to the lived experience of stifling ‘parental care’ and the half-remembered history of domestic slavery. However, the closer one looks at the individual life stories of the most vulnerable people in Tissana, it becomes evident how very contested this ideology of ‘freedom’ remains. Men like Asana and Ba Kpana had arrived in Kagboro, already skilful fishermen and navigators, equipped with their own canoe and a detailed understanding of the sea. Migrants from landlocked villages, arriving for the first time on the coast, are much less equipped to make a life for themselves in the maritime economy: less still, one characterised by the kind of autonomy enjoyed by solo canoe-farers. These migrants often find themselves drawn rapidly back into exploitative labour relations with boat owners established on the coast.

Although it is true that the old agricultural models of dependence have been deeply challenged in Tissana’s fluid, maritime economy, it is certainly not the case that they have disappeared altogether. The same syntax of power we saw operating in the village — in which love, ‘parental care’ and labour exploitation often appear as different facets of the same relationship — persists in Tissana as one model through which more

vulnerable people are integrated into the social world. The alternative, of managing without a patron, comes with its own significant risks.

To illustrate this tension, let me introduce the stories of two fishermen, Cho and Abu. Both men had migrated to Tissana in the second half of the 1990s from small farming villages, arriving on the coast with no friends, no family and no knowledge of the sea. In other respects, though, as we will see, their experience of integration followed two quite radically different paths.

3.3.1 Abu's Story

Abu had grown up near Port Loko: by public transport, a full day's travel from Kagboro Chiefdom. When he was fifteen years old, however, his stepmother suggested sending him to live with her brother, a fisherman who owned a boat in Tissana. Abu described how, when he first arrived on the coast to live with his new *boss-man-cum-foster* father, 'I just took that Pa as my daddy, no more. And he took me now, like his child.' There was, however, from the start, a clear difference between Abu's treatment within the household, and that of 'the Pa's' own birth children. Whereas the other boys went to school, Abu spent his days working on the family boat. Speaking to me twenty years later, he vividly recalls how frightening and isolating those first months had been for him as a young farming boy, suddenly thrust into a life on the sea:

You know what people are like. If you send them your son, he's not their son. They don't feel sorry for him. He used to tie a rope around my waist — I was small! — He'd tie a rope around my waist and throw me in the water. He'd say, 'Dive!'. When I didn't dive, he'd take the rope and beat me with it, to force me to learn to swim! At that time there, my daddy wasn't there, my mama wasn't there. My family were all far away... He used to tie the rope around my waist, and say, 'Sink!' until I sank for some time, then he'd draw me back out.

Abu remained living in his foster father's home, and working in his boat, for many years. Long after he was a fully-grown adult and a skilful fisherman in his own right, both 'the Pa' and his fellow crewmen continued to treat Abu as a junior within the boat. 'They saw me as a boy... But I worked! Ah, I worked well! They used me, that's all, just to show that power there; to say I was just a boy'.

Then, just as we saw taking place in the more ‘traditional’ farming villages of this region, Abu’s subordinate relationship with his foster father was cemented when the older man found a wife for him, and paid the dowry on his behalf. Now heavily indebted — and still being ‘cared for’ as a foster child rather than earning any money of his own — Abu was unable to contemplate moving to another boat. Even as he grew increasingly frustrated, Abu had understood the older man was going to such lengths to tie him into his boat, because he had grown to rely upon the young fisherman whom he had trained from a child:

He can find other fishermen, but to get my kind again, it’s not easy. Because, me: he trained me himself. He trained me. He overworked me. And now I am strong. It’s something like mental slavery. It’s not slavery but it seems like slavery. Once you’re married, he can treat you how he likes in that boat there. He can treat you any way he wants. How are you going to leave that boat? You have to pay him, is that not so? ... Sometimes you can feel really ashamed. You want to leave now, with your woman, but if you want to go, he’ll say, ‘Where’s the money?’ It happens in Africa here. Right now, as we are sitting here, it’s happening. This is Africa-oh!

Abu’s quote reveals to us, again, something of Tissana’s ‘frontier’ mentality; ‘in which local and global imaginaries meet and, eventually, merge’ (De Boeck 2001: 559). On one hand, we saw in the previous section that when people in Tissana mobilise metaphors of ‘enslavement’, the associations they are drawing refer not only to a half-remembered past, but also to a half-imagined rural hinterland. The memory — albeit a distant and perhaps distorted one — of a hinterland in which ‘slaves’ occupy the lowest and most denigrated rung on the social ladder continues to inform the ways in which people on this coast contemplate and negotiate their own unequal power relationships. However, in his throwaway comment, ‘This is Africa!’, Abu is also drawing comparisons in a completely different direction. For all the continuing force of inherited models of reckoning power, the people who I knew in Tissana were highly conscious of the existence — or, at the very least, the possibility — of other, quite different ways of organising wealth, power and obligation.

If, as Keith Hart has claimed, ‘economic anthropology at its best has always been the search for an alternative to capitalism’ (2012: 179), the fisherfolk of the Yawri Bay are

engaged in a parallel search of their own: it is their case for an alternative to the economic model of patronage.

One of anthropology's most cherished promises is to show us our lives afresh through the defamiliarising insight afforded by cross-cultural comparison. Usually it is we who are doing the comparing, but in principle we should be open to the insight that is gained by the others when they are drawing the comparisons themselves. (Bashkow 2006: 1)

Just as previous generations of anthropologists turned to Africa for evidence of working economic systems more 'moral' than our own, my neighbours in Tissana often referred to their own constructed 'others' as a foil against which to contemplate the virtues and vices they saw in their own economy. Here is Abu again, for example, describing his relationship with the foster father-cum-boss-man, whom — even years after their relationship finally disintegrated — he was still referring to as 'the Pa':

I worked for the Pa for eighteen years! Eighteen years! Now, with you white people, if somebody worked for you for eighteen years, you have to pay them, is that not so? But we now, we don't pay.

Abu did eventually manage to extricate himself from his eighteen-year dependency relationship with his foster father: but it had not been easy. He had made himself a small fishing net, and — whenever he was not working in 'the Pa's' boat — had gone alone to fish for mullet directly from the beach. Gradually, secretly, over the course of three years, he managed to save enough money to make a full-sized fishing net of his own:

I strained-oh! I'd hide! To not let him know that I wanted to make a boat for myself. I hid! Because, if he knew... it was he who controlled me. Whatever he wanted to do to me, he could do! At that time, I was small-small. All I had was an idea, a dream. So I hid. This is where I kept the net. In this house, here... I made it inside my bedroom.²⁷ Finally, after three years, I pulled it outside, and everyone saw it! Now, there is a grudge there. Yes. He has a grudge for me. Because he just wants me to work for him... I know [how to fish] and I have decided to get my own boat; to work for my own family.

²⁷ Usually, men make fishing nets in the open, either on their veranda or on the beach (see Figure 11).

However, if Abu's experience reveals the extreme lengths some young men are prepared to go in order to break free of the stifling patronage economy, Cho's story gives us some insight into the dangerous isolation experienced by poor young migrants at the other end of the spectrum: attempting to navigate the stark insecurity of Tissana's open labour market, alone.

3.3.2 Cho's Story

Cho had moved to the coast in the late-1990s, having grown up in a Sherbro-speaking farming village so small and isolated that it has since disappeared entirely, abandoned by all the people who once lived there. In his home village, life for Cho had been tough: 'I worked under my father. Ah! The work was just too much. Strain! We strained, no more'. When Cho found himself the focus of targeted aggression from one of his neighbours over a case of 'woman trouble', he had decided, finally, it was time to leave.

Arriving with no sense of how the fishing industry worked, nor any established friends or relatives to help him navigate the unfamiliar world, Cho had struggled in his new home. The very largest vessels on Tissana's wharf can go to sea with crews of up to twenty fishermen. Representing an investment of around 35,000 leones (£6-7,000), and with nets that sometimes reach a kilometre in length, these are impressive pieces of property by any standard — and particularly so when one considers the general level of poverty in a town like Tissana. Most are significantly smaller than this but, even in the smallest crew-boat, there can be a fairly complex hierarchy of labour, with different fishermen working on quite different terms, depending, in part, on their level of skill, and, in part, on the kind of relationship they have with their *boss-man*. 'It's just like education. There, you have primary, secondary, university. Is that not so? Well, so it is with fishing: by stage. How well you understand fish, that's how they pay you' (Sana, crewman, Tissana).

As a novice to the fishing industry, Cho had found work as a '*job-man*'. Working, by the day or by the week, for any captain prepared to give them the work, these floating labourers are always on the fringes of the crew, and are treated as such. Cho spent years shifting between different fishing boats, always working as the most low-skilled, low-paid, least respected man in the boat. And yet, for all the hardship he endured in his new

role, there was one important respect in which Cho considered his life to have improved dramatically since moving to the coast:

Here, I am free. Anything that I want to do now, I'm free. Sometimes, if you are working with someone, he may try to work-work-work-work you and you will not get any benefit from them. But you can leave the place. I don't have anybody telling me, 'Don't do this, don't do this...' So [for that] I tell God thank you. When I wanted to leave a boat, no problem – I went to a different boat.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance — or the novelty — of this kind of freedom for a young man arriving directly from a farming village. So, despite their undeniable vulnerability, the very 'outsiderness' of floating *job-men* stands them in sharp contrast to the kind of family-bonded labour that Abu had found himself embroiled in. When boat owners want to demonstrate that they treat their crewmen 'fairly', the first thing they are likely to emphasise is that their employees are free to leave at any moment.

3.3.3 *Paying Crewmen with 'Time'*

One of the most interesting things about the evolving economic relationships within crew-boats is that, over the past fifteen years, it has become rare for boat owners to pay their fishermen directly, either in cash, or fish, or any other obviously material form of wealth. Instead, every boat I knew of now operates a system of payment in 'days'. What this means is that, on the first four days of the working week, the crew do not expect to be given anything other than a small 'gift' of fish; rarely any more than their own family will consume that evening for dinner. The remaining two working days are 'given' in payment to the crew. On these days, they can use their boss's boat as though it were their own. They club together to pay for their own fuel and, when they return to land, divide the catch amongst themselves, each selling his own share to his own customers.

On one hand, this system can be seen as a pragmatic response to gradual depletion of the Yawri Bay's fish stocks. In contrast to the initial 'boom years' of commercial fishing from the 1960s to the 1980s — when, to hear fishermen reminisce now, the fish in the Yawri Bay had seemed inexhaustible — progressive overfishing over the intervening decades means that, nowadays, fish catches are ever less predictable. Over recent decades, Tissana's fishermen have come in line with fishermen in 'virtually every area of

the world', negotiating payment structures flexible enough to absorb these extreme fluctuations (Acheson 1981: 278).

However, these patterns of risk-sharing have a very particular significance in the Sierra Leonean context; for it is difficult to imagine a system better designed to destabilise the old moral model of patronage and dependence. Rather than being cared for, and controlled, by a patron the kind of whom dominates folk memories of power in this region, crewmen are offered instead a window of opportunity through which to operate as entrepreneurs in their own right, albeit a narrow and increasingly uncertain window. One important result of this shift is that it allows poor crewmen a window of time in which to experience some *sense* (illusion?) of the independence we saw amongst solo canoe fishermen. The importance is not missed, on *boss-men*, of working to give the men in their boat the strongest possible impression of economic independence, at least on those two days when their work time is their own. Here is Abu again — describing his efforts to ensure his own crew are treated more fairly than he had been in 'the Pa's' boat.

Me, I'm a *dreg-man* [lowly labourer] at heart. I suffered for a long time before I got my own boat. So I know, when you work under a person, I know what you go through... On my fishermen's days... I don't even look at how much they have. As soon as they start counting, I just leave — so they know that I don't know. I just take whatever they give me.

For their part, by 'giving' their crew the same fixed, reliable amount of time each week, boat owners are absolved of direct personal responsibility for the reality that, for almost every crewman on Tissana Wharf, the fish they catch is barely enough to subsist upon. Here, Kumba is explaining why he considers 'time' to be fairest possible way of paying his crewmen:

The new system — of days — is better. Because, now, if you go to sea on your day and you don't get anything, you know that God has not given you. But if you go and you get a fine catch, then anything that you bring home is yours. No boss can interfere again to say, 'I gave you these days but now I want to take some of this fish' No! You'll offend them. So everyone keeps to his own satisfaction. (Kumba, boat owner)

Even by local standards, Kumba was not a rich man and he worked hard, going to sea with his crew every day. Like many small-scale *boss-men*, caught in the slipstream of global forces bigger than themselves, he was struggling to manage the ever-narrowing margin between declining fish stocks and the dramatically rising price of fuel, nylon thread (for making nets) and imported rice. Sitting for long hours together in the tight isolation of his tiny boat, paddling for miles under scorching dry season sun and battered by rainy season downpours, it is hardly surprising that these men developed a deep and sincere sense of solidarity for one another.

Nonetheless, even with all these caveats, any discourse that enables boat owners to disclaim their crewmen's poverty as evidence that 'God has not given them' can be a dangerous one. This is especially problematic in the largest boats, in which crew must divide their day's catch between as many as twenty people:

Before I got my boat, I was working as the captain in my brother's boat. There were so many of us in that crew! ... At times we would be fourteen or fifteen. So just imagine: maybe you get a good catch. You take the petrol money out, what's left there? Maybe four or five hundred thousand leones. There's not much money there, when you have to share it between fifteen people — let me say 30 or 35,000 each (£5-7). So you're holding 35,000 leones. You've got a woman. You've got children. You have to eat. You understand? So I think it's not fair. You aren't able to satisfy your needs. (Moses, boat owner)

In theory, at least, it is true that, if a *boss-man* treats his crew unfairly, 'then the following morning, you will not see any of them! They will go to another boat!' (Akin Mama, boat owner). Yet, there is a clear sense in which the very 'freedom' village émigrés crave is often what leaves them most exposed to exploitation in their adoptive home. Experienced fishermen are in a much stronger position but, given the rate of migration into the Yawri Bay, the *unskilled* labour of newly arrived rural migrants is never in short supply. Indeed, Cho's experience suggests some *boss-men* are fairly indifferent to a high turnover of unskilled fishermen in their boat:

There are some *boss-men* who embrace their fishermen — who hold them fine, take care of them. If the fisherman has a problem, it's just as though it was their [the *boss-man's*] own problem. *Because if you've got a person [dependant], that's how it should be; if he has a problem, it is you who has that problem.* Yes. But

there are others who don't look after their fishermen. Sometimes, even if the fisherman who is there with him is sick, the boss doesn't care! That sickness can sit down [fester] for a long time, and the *boss-man* just doesn't even have time [to care]. Even up to the last, and they die. Yes. (Cho, crewman, my emphasis)

Cho's testimony draws us back, once more, to that now-familiar tension. However relieved he might have been to escape the suffocating insularity of his home village, the fact remains that Cho had lived his entire life in a world structured by the basic moral principle of patrimonial kinship: that patrons have a fundamental duty of material care towards the people 'beneath' them. It was disorienting — and frightening — to find this safety net removed.

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to introduce Tissana through the narratives of some of those young men who, for at least the past sixty years, have been arriving on the Kagboro Coast hoping to build a different kind of life for themselves there: an alternative to the stifling patrimonial authority of 'traditional' economic life. Presenting themselves, as they so often do — not just as economic migrants, but rather as outcasts and fugitives — Tissana's village émigrés appear, inadvertently, to align themselves with 'the stock figures of many frontiers' (Scott 2009: 132). In this regard, their stories resonate rather neatly with James Scott's (2009) image of inaccessible frontier regions as spaces of political *resistance*, which people are able to retreat to in a conscious bid to reject the dominant political order.

One thing I have been interested to explore in this chapter is the extent to which Scott's argument remains salient in contexts, such as rural Sherbroland, where the state is conspicuous only by its absence. When economies come close to collapse, it is not uncommon for these strains to be *experienced* most powerfully by individuals at the level of their most immediate personal relationships; even when, as is often the case, these micropolitical tensions divert attention from the wider structural roots of their poverty (cf. Booth *et al.* 1999: 23; Whitehead 1990; Schoepf and Schoepf 1988).

In rural Sherbroland, the most salient focus of oppression and resistance in people's lives is not the missing authority of an invisible central government, but the subtle forms of coercion that weave through kinship networks, households and close, interdependent personal relationships. Tissana — with its high population fluidity, its informal marriages, porous households, and often causal patterns of employment — appears, at first glance, the perfect antithesis to the tightly integrated monoethnic villages of the kind Pa Kpana, Moses and Cho had each decided to flee as young men.

And yet, an argument that recurs in various guises throughout this thesis is that the memory of that village moral economy continues to play a powerful role in shaping the complexities and ambivalences of Tissana's moral economy. Whenever large numbers of young rural migrants converge in boom town economies, in places at once remote and cosmopolitan, the social worlds created in these 'frontier' spaces are marked by a complex 'potpourri between... "traditions" and "modern" categories, practices, mentalities, relationships and belief systems' (De Boeck 2001: 559; cf. Walsh 2009; Mitchell 1956).

Much of the anxiety in circulation in Tissana derives from the fact that, in the wake of this massive social upheaval, people find themselves navigating between two quite different models of reckoning economic value. For the individuals navigating through these economic transitions, it is rarely self-evident where their social responsibilities, or even their social aspirations, ought to lie. On one hand, most of Tissana's residents shared the ideal — strongly held if only ever fleetingly realised — that theirs is the kind of town where a person *ought* to be able to aspire to personal economic 'freedom'. On the other hand, Tissana's most vulnerable people live so close to edge of subsistence that it is typically only a matter of time before they find themselves in need of financial help. However much crewmen might dread the proposition of falling into the 'mental slavery' of indebted labour, the alternative — of attempting to manage with no patron at all — can be an even more frightening proposition.

This chapter has been almost exclusively about men, and the relationships I have focused on have, for the most part, been clearly hierarchical. In the following chapter, I complicate this image by turning my attention to the daily negotiations between boat owners, crewmen and women who buy their fish on the wharf. Through the lens of these gendered trading partnerships, I continue to explore the uneasy intersection

between the apparent 'freedom' offered by the market, and the tenacity of other, more socially binding ways of relating.

Chapter 4: Plantain Island Sirens

Loads of men I've known, they left Tissana to go to Plantain Island — just for a few days, just to make a bit of money — but you never see them back in Tissana again! Loads of men I've known, they're never coming back here again... That's why I never sleep on Plantain. The women there will say, 'Why don't you just stay here for one night? In the morning, I'll find you some bait...' No! If I ever land my boat there, I just sell my fish and come straight home! The women who are there, they know how to catch a man. (Kumba, boat owner)

In Western imaginations, fishing has historically been associated with stereotypes of tough, independent men (Acheson 1981; Schoembucher 1988). This long-standing aesthetic, linking the romance of the sea to images of rugged masculinity (Phelan 2007) has often led researchers to take a curiously androcentric perspective on life in fishing towns. When they were visible at all, women have often been represented as secondary or subordinate actors; 'always marginal to the maritime enterprise and culture they entered almost as if my mistake' (Creighton and Norling 1996: 10; cf. Davis and Nadel-Klein 1992). Such an approach would be impossible to sustain in a town like Tissana, where daily economic life is powered, to a very large degree, by exchange relationships that are explicitly and richly gendered.

Almost every woman in Tissana works, on one scale or another, as a fish processor (*banda* woman), procuring fish from boats on the wharf and drying them on behalf of the urban traders who congregate here from every city in Sierra Leone (see Figure 12). Tissana's boat captains often exchange cautionary tales — as Kumba did, above — in which the *banda* women in neighbouring wharf towns are represented as powerful seductresses and dangerous economic predators. Although these tales are usually recounted playfully, I suggest in this chapter that they express a genuine concern amongst fishermen that they risk finding themselves entangled, against their will, in gendered economic relationships that threaten their aspirations to independence and free mobility.

Similar anxieties have a long genealogy in Sierra Leone. We saw in the previous chapter that, in agricultural regions, one of the longest-standing and most deeply resented mechanisms by which landowning elders are able to manipulate the labour of their poorer male neighbours is to accuse them of adultery and fine them for ‘woman trouble’. So it forms part of an enduring model of social power that fishermen continue to draw a direct association between their sexuality, on one hand, and the potential loss of personal autonomy, on the other. However, the tensions that characterise heterosexual relationships around the fringes of the Yawri Bay need to be viewed as arising within a very particular material environment and at the intersection of specific tensions in the maritime economy.

A major theme in classic ethnography of Sierra Leone was concerned with understanding how young people became fully gendered adults only through periods of time spent in strict ritual segregation, in their respective ‘secret society bush’ (Jędrej 1976, MacCormack 1980, Lamp 1985). Poro and Bundu ideology cast the boundaries of contact and mixing between the sexes as a ‘highly charged and potentially dangerous’ realm (Bledsoe 1984: 465). Initiation societies remain important in Tissana. But the delineation of ‘male space’ from ‘female space’ has also come to be mapped in quite different patterns across the maritime economy. My focus in this chapter is on the tensions that emerge for both groups in the highly charged (and indeed, in some cases, potentially dangerous) economic spaces, where their two gendered spaces reconverge: on the wharf, as fishing boats return to land.

A second contribution of the chapter, is to provide a window into the ways people readjust their expectations, and renegotiate their social relationships in the face of economic decline: when ‘it appears that a boom that once gave them hope is now a thing of the past’ (Walsh 2012: 237; cf. Ferguson 1999). Even as the Yawri Bay’s fishing population continues to rise, the overwhelming sense amongst my neighbours in Tissana was that their once-abundant marine environment had already been stretched beyond its limits. The decimation of West African fisheries is well-documented in the marine biology literature, and has become the subject of fairly high-profile environmental campaigning in recent years (Ukwe *et al.* 2006; EJJ 2012). What is much less well understood, however, is how these new pressures are being refracted through the social fabric of coastal communities. My discussion unfolds in several stages:

The story of Tissana's 'boom' — at least as it is remembered now, in the narratives of my informants — as one of rapid economic liberalisation, in which fish had changed hands on the wharf according to simple, impersonal logic of supply and demand. Whilst nobody has been left entirely unscathed by this pervasive sense of economic contraction, I argue (in **Section 4.3**) that Tissana's women have come under particularly strong pressure, as the balance of market forces on the wharf has slid progressively out of their favour.

Faced with the escalating precarity of an economy in which declining fish stocks are ever more fiercely contested by Tissana's *banda* women are no longer able to rely on 'the market' to provide any semblance of material security. In **Section 4.4**, I discuss the ways in which women have responded to this increased competition for fish, by learning to invest ever more of their creative energy working to forge and maintain business relationships that are as social as they are economic. Finally (in **Section 4.5**) I return to the men's cautionary tales about predatory economic seductresses in other wharf towns, and suggest that these accounts can be understood as playful expressions of deep, gendered tensions in the Yawri Bay's economy: in which people continue to aspire to economic 'freedom', but the 'free market' is already part of a receding memory of a historic 'boom'.

4.1 The Substance of Fish and Recollections of a 'Free' Market

We were waiting for Asana's wife to be 'pulled', finally, from the women's secret society bush; the public culmination of an initiation process that, for Mary, had spanned over a decade. Although you would hardly have guessed it was such a momentous day if you had seen us sitting there, the men and I, sipping tea, chain-smoking, bemoaning the state of the world.

Ibrahim, fresh back from a long, hard day at sea, was slumped at the end of Asana's veranda: a bulky mass of aching muscle and briny disappointment. 'Don't take my photo today – I'm so dirty!' he warned when he saw I had my

camera with me. Seeing him so crestfallen, I assumed at first he'd had a disappointing day at sea. I was mistaken. In fact, he and his crewmates had landed an unusually good catch that day. Things had only begun to look bad for them when, returning to town triumphant, they discovered that several other large boats, equally successful at sea, had made it back to shore ahead of them. 'The fish is there — loads!', he recounted, wearily, 'but there's no profit'.

Such was the influx of fish onto the wharf that afternoon that, even as Mary and the other initiates completed the final stages of their long transition into adulthood, their fellow Bundu women had little chance to show an interest. Rather than passing the day as they might have anticipated — singing and dancing for their friends in the society bush — almost all Tissana's women were here, in town, crouched in groups of two or three at the doors of their smokehouses (*bandas*), industriously washing and gutting and scraping the scales from bumper *baff*-fulls²⁸ of glittering fish: fish that glittered all the brighter for having been bought so cheaply.

This scene from my field notes highlights two very simple facts about life on Tissana Wharf. Firstly, it serves to illustrate the absolute centrality of fish to Tissana's social life that, even on a day of ritual celebration the women had been anticipating for months, all their previous plans were immediately relegated when the unexpected opportunity arose to buy cheap fish. Secondly, it begins to suggest something of the fluctuating power relations played out between men and women on the wharf each day; that sometimes the fishermen's loss can work to the *banda* women's gain.

It is not uncommon for a woman to co-own a fishing boat with her male partner, if the initial investment had come from her or her family. However, boats are inherently male spaces — just as *bandas* are almost always female ones — and, in everyday speech, most couples tend to slide towards referring to the man as the *boss-man* of 'his' boat. Only rarely did one come across women like my neighbour, Sento, who not only owned a boat, but also wielded, seemingly uncontested, all the management powers usually associated with *boss-men*. Sento's husband had his own boat, but it was hers,

²⁸ Derived from the English word "bath", a *baff* or *baff-pan* is a wide, shallow rubber tub about a metre across and 50 cm high. It is the standard unit by which small, fresh fish are measured on the wharf.

‘Defender’, that lent its name to the cluster of houses and *bandas* where they and their dependants lived: Defender Compound.

Sento was exceptional — not for nothing was she was known throughout Tissana as a particularly formidable figure — but, even in a more typical partnership, the rhetorical slide towards recognising the man as ‘boss-man’ refers only to one quite specific form of power, explicitly located within the delimited male space of boat and sea. In fact, as this wealthy boat owner on Plantain Island was keen to stress at length, there are important respects in which women are recognised as more powerful than their fishermen counterparts.

Women are the stakeholders in fishing communities... Even if a man has ten boats, he cannot manage the affairs of the home! We really rely on women. We just bring in the finances, but to control those finances is a problem for us... The women, they bargain on a certain price [with traders]... If you want to lead a better life in a fishing community as a man, you *must* have a strong woman. You *must* have a strong woman in the home who can manage the finances. For you the husband, all alone by yourself, it is not easy... You will make a lot of money and spend it! But the women don't do that. (Ben, boat owner)

His use of that telltale development term, stakeholders, suggests that he might perhaps have been performing, if only subtly, to the white woman’s sensibilities he projected upon me: Ben is a worldly man, and no stranger to NGO discourse. Nonetheless, whilst his tone differs from that of most men I knew in Tissana, the main point he is making here — that women are, if anything, the more canny and business-minded of the sexes— is something that few of my friends would have taken issue with.

To understand the fluctuations of gendered power on Tissana Wharf, we need to begin with a sense of the particular material properties of raw fish. In Sierra Leone’s hot, humid climate, fresh fish rot fast — so fishermen have no choice but to sell their catch the moment they return to land. On the other hand, every individual fish processor has a fixed limit on the volume of fish she is able to dry, depending on not only her capital, but also the size of her *banda* (smokehouse) and her supply of dry wood. Combine this with the unpredictability of fishing — on a day when twenty-five boats go to sea, it is impossible to forecast whether one or seven or none at all will return to land with a

substantial catch — and you can begin to imagine how these extreme fluctuations in fish supply might translate into equally extreme fluctuations in the amount women are prepared to pay for those fish.

In what appears to be a very neat description of an economy regulated by morally neutral market forces, the captain of one large boat explained to me, ‘When loads of fish come... if two, three, four boats catch together, it's stiff [there's pressure] to make the price come down. If the fish shorten again, it rises up.’ In extreme cases, on days when the catch is remarkably high, those fishermen returning to land late in the day can find themselves in Ibrahim's frustrating situation where, as he had put it, ‘The fish is there — loads! — but there's no profit’.

According to my informants' recollections, days like these had once been commonplace in Tissana. The latter decades of the 20th century are nowadays remembered with nostalgia as a period of seemingly inexorable economic growth, as local fishermen adopted a series of increasingly efficient fishing methods, each imported from elsewhere on the West African coast. Whenever I asked non-fishermen to recall this recent history, they would almost always emphasise, as Pa Bimbola does here, that ‘Sometimes, there were so many fish they had to just throw them away. If you went to the wharf, they'd give you fish — sometimes even a *baff*-pan [a metre-wide tub] full!’ Here, one of Tissana's experienced fish processors paints a vivid image of the wharf side economy, at the time when Kagboro's seas had seemed to contain inexhaustible riches:

At that time, if you stood on the land, you could see *bonga*... If we stood right here, you'd see them; it looked like the water was boiling... with the fish jump, jumping... We women, we'd stand on the land; we'd see the fish and we'd call to the men, ‘Come! Come, look at the fish!’ Then they'd take their net and come and cast it — catch so many fish! (Sina, *banda* woman)

What is striking, as Sina continues her account, is that *for fishermen* there had been a limit on the value of these enormous catches — which had frequently exceeded the capacity local *banda* women were prepared to buy. With the closest urban fish market well over a day's journey away, any fish that were not dried immediately would rapidly decay from a valuable source of wealth to a stinking liability:

If they'd caught a lot of fish then, at dawn, the chief would walk around all the *bandas* and, if he smelled rotten fish, he'd summon that person [to court]. Because rotten fish attracts flies, and flies spread diseases — cholera. [He'd check] every house; every house... So, the boat owners — they'd measure them, measure them, measure them for us *banda* women... Then they'd just dig a hole in the sand and cover them up, so as not to let them smell. We couldn't finish them all. There wasn't enough wood to dry them. We *banda* women, we'd dry teeeeeee... we'd dry from morning, till night, till dawn. (Sina, *banda* woman)

When people look back to the 1970s and 1980s, in the period just after dragnet fishing was introduced, they describe patterns of bargaining between men and women on the wharf as having been driven by the simple mechanics of supply and demand. Provided she had enough money, any *banda* woman who came to the wharf could buy as much fish as she was capable of drying. As the supply of fish rose, their cost would fall until, eventually, their value bottomed out entirely. Hawa gives a particularly lucid account of the dynamics on the wharf:

If there were three *sim*-boats [dragnet boats], then each had one day. If all three went to sea together, we'd never have been able to dry all the fish. If you had money, you'd dry; you'd fill your *banda* full – *pim*! At first, they'd sell for 5,000 leones [per *baff*]. Then the price would drop; 4,000, 3,000... But, if they saw that no one else was coming, then they'd tell anyone who had wood to gather it... They'd just leave the fish on the wharf and call, 'You who have *bandas*, who have wood, come and gather! Don't let the fish rot!' And they'd just give you!

And, as Hawa goes on to describe, experienced *banda* women like herself knew very well how to exploit such unpredictable surges in the fish supply:

They'd just give the fish to any person who was able to dry! Because there are some people: they have wood, they have a *banda*, but they don't have money. You see now, eh? So, if you've got wood, you've got a *banda*; they'd tross you [give you fish on credit]. You know, my *banda* takes five or six *baffs* so, if you've tross'd me four *baffs*, now I'll wait until the laaaaaast minute, when they just decide to give the fish away. Those last two *baffs* are for me! So, after I've sold my fish, I'll only pay the fishermen for the four pans... I've made a profit!

However, such opportunities are, they say, increasingly rare for *banda* women. If there was one statement I heard repeated more frequently than any other across the entire spectrum of my interviews, it was this: ‘You don’t get plenty catch anymore, like first time’. Although the volume of catch on the wharf fluctuates sharply on a day-to-day basis, the longer-term narrative I was repeatedly presented with was one of gradual but dramatic overall decline. Certainly, in the eighteen months I spent there, I remember less than a handful of isolated occasions when the supply of fish outstripped demand. These were notable events, becoming the subject of conversation around town for several days or even weeks. This excerpt from my field notes captures some of the excitement generated by one such catch at Tissana Point, about a mile along the coast from where I lived:

Buema came into my room last night, excited. ‘Those fishermen from Delken caught nasty [so much] fish! There’s not enough wood to dry it all. If you could see the population there, at the wharf: the place was full up — PIM! They’re *tross-tross*’ing the fish. They’re begging people to take the fish. There’s no wood left!’

When Fatti arrived this morning, she was full of the same story. Playing the role of a fisherman, she bounded around our veranda, clutching her hands in mock-desperation, begging each person in turn, ‘Please, please, I beg you, take this fish from me! ... Fine-fine fish, big as your arm; they were measuring by the *baffi*!’²⁹

So, however routine it may once have been for fishermen to auction their surplus catch down to extreme bargain prices, such occurrences are nowadays greeted as exceptional. To understand the depths of Ibrahim’s disappointment at being forced to sell off his fish on the cheap, it has to be viewed within a contemporary context in which *banda* women rarely anymore wield such direct haggling power on the wharf.

²⁹ Usually only small, cheap fish are sold by volume in this way. Under usual circumstances, larger ‘fine’ fish are individually priced.

4.2 Declining Fish Stocks and the Re-embedding of Tissana's Moral Economy

With a still-growing population of *banda* women competing to make their living on the basis of an ever-smaller and less reliable supply of fish, the most urgent problem nowadays concerning fish processors is not what *price* they are able to bargain for the fish that they buy, but whether they are able to buy any fish at all. I was often struck that, just as men must use all their skill and strategy to hunt fish on the open water, the same is equally true of women hunting fish along the beach. Many fish processors pass a large part of each day meandering up and down Tissana's two-mile wharf, attempting to match their movements to coincide with the (only very loosely predictable) arrival times of the different boats. Where they accumulate at the landing sites of particularly large boats, *banda* women form the kernel of a vital, but transient, gendered social space within Tissana. As they sit waiting, sometimes for hours — watching the sea, chatting, braiding one another's hair — these would-be buyers are joined by other women; sometimes with pans full of fruit to barter, sometimes with cakes or cooked food to sell; sometimes hoping their friendship alone might be currency enough to elicit a few fish when the boat finally arrives.

My early field notes are littered with often quite confused accounts of the scenes that unfolded on the wharf immediately after one of these larger boats returned to land, as I attempted to untangle the unspoken logic by which some people were able to buy fish, and others returned home empty-handed. This breathless excerpt from early in my field notes captures some of my initial bewilderment at the scene of an unusually good catch:

We were already 'down wharf' when Buema received an urgent call from Jacob, telling her to rush to Patti: Tito's boat had landed the most enormous catch! By the time we arrived, that entire stretch of beach was crowded with hundreds of people, all focused in an orderly jostle for fish. Steady strings of women were wading back and forth, chest-deep into the sea, to huddle around Tito's boat where it sat, heavy in the water, piled impossibly high with its shimmering load. So full was the boat with fish that Tito's crew had to balance on its edges as they sorted and counted the fish, helping the women to fill their heavy pans to be toted back and turned out on the beach, and counted and sorted and

redistributed again; hundreds of hands, industriously, methodically redistributing the fish according to patterns that remained, to me, unreadable.

Some women had a few fine fish laid out beside them; some were picking through *baff*-loads of small fry, removing the jellyfish; others still were standing over heaps of *bonga*, turned out on the sand... Jacob, for his part, had been bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet when we arrived: 'I heard a great commotion on the beach and came to see what was happening!' But, as the fish were gradually distributed, his excitement began to wane. It became clear that he was not getting anything that day.

Contrast that against the following excerpt, describing the scene on the wharf following a more typical catch (see Figure 9):

By the time Brima's crew drew close to land, there must have been over fifty of us awaiting them on the beach. But despite the large number of women who had come to the wharf with their *baff*-pans, only a small fraction stirred from their seats when the fish began to be carried ashore. A handful leaned over the heaps of fish where they were turned out onto the sand and began picking through to decide which they would take. Other women were displaying varying degrees of half-interest in this measuring and sorting but most, seeing the disappointing size of the catch... began to drift off in different directions or, for lack of anything more urgent to do, simply finished their mango and their conversation... When I asked Marriama whether she was planning to buy, she had laughed at the silliness of my question: 'If they *sell-gi* [sell/give] me, I'll buy!'

Had Marriama been discussing any other commodity, she would simply have used the verb 'sell'; had she been describing a gift, she would have used the word 'gi'. It is no accident that the Krio term used to describe sales of fresh fish merges those two concepts into a single hybrid term, to *sell/give*. The expression captures an important quality of the transactions that take place on Tissana's wharf each day. Regardless of the fact that Marriama had come to the wharf with cash, fully expecting to pay for any fish she managed to procure, her words have embedded within them the implication that, if any such transaction transpired, the fisherman or boat owner would have been doing her *a personal favour*.

After some time in Tissana I began to realise that, for all their seemingly opportunistic movements up and down the wharf, *banda* women know very well which boats are likely to *sell-gi* them fish, and under what circumstances. To put it most simply, the only really reliable way for a *banda* woman to secure a regular supply of fish is to establish a ‘*kustoment*’ (trading partner) relationship with fishermen who are then obligated to give her first refusal on his catch. Although they will buy opportunistically wherever they can, many *banda* women have only a single regular *kustoment*. Very often, this will be her ‘man’, and their business relationship is closely interwoven with their personal one.

‘Her man’ (*in man*) and ‘his woman’ (*in uman*) are the terms most often used to describe the opposing partners in any socially recognised heterosexual relationship. In Tissana’s fluid world, these are malleable categories and can apply regardless of whether the two people are legally married, have had children together, or cohabit; indeed, regardless of whether they even live in the same town. Spanning this diverse range of relationships, the one thing of which you can be relatively certain wherever these terms are used is that there will be an important public economic dimension to the partnership.³⁰ Even so, it would be rare for their conjugal finances to merge completely. Here, as in rural parts of Sierra Leone, ‘husbands and wives have always maintained separate income streams and expenditures, whether in cash or kind’ (Leach 1994: 189). What this means is that many women *buy* fish from their husband, then sell it on to their trader-*kustoments* at a small profit.

Unfortunately, if a *banda* woman’s partner is himself a poor crew member, his custom alone does not go very far toward securing a steady supply of fish. As we saw in the previous chapter, crewmen are typically ‘given’ two days each week to divide the boat’s catch amongst themselves, each channelling his share directly to his own *kustoment*. On the remaining four days of the working week, the catch belongs entirely to the boat owner and it is his decision who to *sell-gi*. Yet, even on these days, you can expect to see the entire crew’s wives waiting at the wharf for their husbands’ boat. Their personal connection to the *boss-man* gives them good reason to hope they may be offered the opportunity to buy some of the surplus — if and when his own wife’s *banda* is full. This is by no means guaranteed, however, and they will be competing with various other

³⁰ This in contrast to more illicit heterosexual relations, where gifts are made more secretively.

women — relatives, friends, perhaps girlfriends of the boat owner — each of whom has her own special social claim to a share of the catch.

This straining of rather too sparse resources across rather too stretched social networks is a common feature of life in Tissana; but it stands in sharp contrast to a not so distant past in which fish were in such plentiful supply that, as we hear these two elders reminiscing of life in the 1970s:

‘Everyone would sell to everybody... There was no discrimination’ (Pa Kwashie).

‘Yes... before, there were no regular *kustoments* at that time. Whoever had money, could buy. This fish was plentiful. We’d get a good catch! I think the people who were here before were more lively than now. There was more happiness. The money was flowing.’ (Pa Yannie)

The nostalgia these elders express for the simpler, more impersonal market economy of their town’s recent history forms an interesting counterpoint to the substantial body of classic ethnographic literature, describing the anxiety people experience when previously complex and multilayered socio-economic systems are eroded by the depersonalising forces of money (Bohannon 1959; Hutchinson 1992; Burkhalter and Murphy 1989, see Chapter 1).

In her fieldwork in Makeni in northern Sierra Leone, Catherine Bolten paints a bleak picture in which the social values previously inherent in economic life had been eroded by the grinding poverty of the post-war economy. Such was the level of general material insecurity at the time of her research that she found ‘a constant moral struggle within individuals, families, and the community’, as people were routinely left with no choice but to abandon even their most basic social obligations to contribute to the well-being of those who might, under ‘normal’ circumstances, have been their dependants (2008: 3). Here we can see parallels with Simone’s similarly stark account of the livelihood strategies of the urban poor in Douala (Cameroon). Much as Bolten’s account suggests in the Sierra Leonean case, Simone emphasises the isolating fluidity of fragile livelihood strategies that force people to depend on a constant, restless circulation of social and economic relationships. Whilst they must often exploit networks of neighbours and kin to meet their basic survival needs, people take care not to allow these opportunistic relationships to solidify into long-term dependencies, being driven instead by the need to ‘sufficiently extricate themselves from household responsibilities, perspectives and

norms so as to keep themselves open to new alliances, sources of information and opportunities' (2005: 519).

In both cases, the 'individualism' of poor urban residents is not only deeply threatening to moral norms; it also appears as a last resort coping mechanism, of people living under such extreme material pressure that they can simply no longer afford to be social. Bolten argues that, it is in response to this generalised inability of people to invest their material wealth in nurturing their social relationships that, in post-war Makeni, 'Jealousy and suspicion of greediness' came to be 'the most potent emotions moving people to action' (2008: 97).

The image that emerges in Tissana is rather more complicated. Certainly, social life is saturated with tensions and anxieties arising from the unanswered question of what each person's material responsibilities are to their family and neighbours. However, it would be too simple, I think, to view this anxiety as arising from the violation of a simple moral exemplar in which 'Sierra Leoneans... are ideally tied in webs of mutual obligation' (ibid: 55). We saw in the previous chapter that, far from expressing nostalgia for the more socially embedded moral economy of village life, many of the migrants who have been arriving in Tissana in growing numbers since the 1960s had chosen to relocate to the coast precisely to *escape* the heavily moralised, patrimonial-type relationships that had shaped their economic lives inland.

According to the way my informants recounted their own recent history, their experience of material impoverishment has caused economic relationships to become not less but *more* socially embedded. There is nowadays such fierce competition for fish on the wharf that boat owners rarely sell their catch to anyone beyond their own close personal network of friends, lovers and family. Whereas it had once been possible to buy and sell fish with little thought for anything other than the simple calculation of profit, the wharf side economy is nowadays 'permeated with [the]... atmosphere of the gift, where obligation and liberty intermingle' (Mauss 1990 [1925]: 65).

Often boat owners would make this creeping re-moralisation of the economy very explicit in their conversations with me. When I asked Tito whether it was the same women who came to meet his boat every day, he answered, 'Yes, I have my regular *kustoments*, but sometimes another person can come and *ask me to help them*. I *sell-gi*

them' (my emphasis). On another occasion, sitting outside her cavernous smokehouse, my wealthy, boat-owning neighbour, Sento, claimed that, on the occasions that she sells fish to other *banda* women, this decision is not motivated by business pragmatism, but rather by neighbourly altruism:

Myself, I have my own boat. But on some days, I don't dry; I *sell-gi* to my companions. [For example] you and me, we know one another; I would *sell-gi* to you... I'm not just going to say, 'Only I can dry, no one else'. If I *sell-gi* to you, God must add to my own money, because you'll be grateful to me.

We should be careful not to read this moralising *language* as evidence that the transformations in Tissana's tightening economy are any more benign than those Bolten described in Makeni. In more industrial contexts, for example, ethnographers have described the ways in which the language of corporate benevolence can work to obfuscate new forms of labour exploitation (Sanchez 2012). The very fact that boat owners are able to talk convincingly about *selling* their fish, as though these transactions were acts of munificence, only serves to highlight the extent to which economic power has slid away from the women who buy and dry fish. However sincere boat owners might be in imagining their sales on the wharf as acts of 'helping' the women who buy their fish, the reality is that they tend to make a far greater profit from these transactions than their buyers could ever hope to. What is being 'given' is not wealth, but only the coveted crevice of an opportunity through which, perhaps, to make some.

Unsurprisingly, to hear a poor fish processor describing the same transaction, one comes away with rather less impression that she considers herself the recipient of a generous gift. The tone of Leagbe's quote here is typical: 'Even the fish that we buy on the wharf, with all the suffering... I get so little profit. If I had any other work to do, I'd leave this fish business straight away... The fishermen still earn but we *banda* women: nothing!' This steady slide in the balance of supply and demand on the wharf had inexorably eroded women's bargaining power such that, as Ima explains here, women often find themselves struggling to work within a stiflingly narrow profit margin:

For each *baff*, you need two bunches of wood — those two bunches are 10,000 leones! Then two pints of kerosene, which is 4,000 leones. It's reached 14,000 now, you see?... Some days you pay 60,000 [for a *baff* of fresh fish]; some days, 55,000; some days, 40,000. If you buy them for 40,000, then you sell them for

55,000. There's no profit! We're just trying, that's all, to get what we need to live — for our family. Perhaps you might get 5,000 leones there [approximately £1].

The following conversation gives some sense of the mundane drudgery endured by small-scale *banda* women like Leagbe and Ima, who simply coax the most basic subsistence from the fish economy. I had met Momi on the wharf, sitting in the sand, cleaning a half-*baff* full of tiny, juvenile fish. The little fish were all mixed up with silt and leaves from the seabed, so I sat down to join her, absent-mindedly, in cleaning them. 'Let's go,' Momi said, tossing me a cloth, so that I could tote one of her *baff*-pans back to her *banda*. When we arrived, I perched on a piece of firewood beside her, as she rapidly processed the fish — efficiently scraping scales, cutting off tendrils, removing tiny guts. She let out a deep sigh: 'This work! This work is *mona* [hard, tedious]'

When traders give me money, I go down wharf to buy fish... If I get fish, I scrape them, wash them, lay them on my *banda* ... I go and buy wood, then I carry it back here and lay the fire, buy kerosene. I watch the fire through the night then, at daybreak, I turn [the fish] and go and buy more wood, to make a new fire — new, fresh fire. I watch that fire now, till afternoon.

Me: Wow — when do you sleep?

If the boats land... in the afternoon, sometimes you won't sleep. Sometimes you can sleep a little in the smokehouse.

Tissana's women routinely stay up all through the night, and spend many hours each day in their swelteringly hot, dark, densely smoke-filled *bandas*. Because her day is structured by the movements of the fishing boats, and mechanics of fish-drying, Momi's punishing working rhythm continues unabated, regardless of whether she had managed to secure a decent load of fish on the wharf, or whether, as on the day described above, she had only a tiny quantity of low-value fish. For all her labour, it is unlikely Momi would have made more than 2,000 leones (40 pence) profit that day. However, whilst it is true that fish processors rarely nowadays wield much power to negotiate in the simple economic logic of supply and demand, it certainly does not follow that such women are passive in their interactions with fishermen. They could not afford to be. As Sento's emphasis on 'knowing one another' suggests, it is nowadays almost impossible to buy this fish without having an active personal network upon which to draw. What is particularly interesting, as I go on to explore in the following sections, is the creativity

with which *banda* women have responded to this shifting economic reality; using every material resource available to them, to nurture ongoing relationships with fishermen, and so increase their chances of being able to buy fish on the wharf.

4.3 Making *Kustoment* Relationships

I have so far been following local speech patterns by repeatedly sliding toward generalising accounts of gendered *kustoment* relationships in the categories of ‘wives’ and ‘husbands’. Yet such language lends these economic transactions a veneer of permanence or inevitability, which risks obfuscating the amount of deliberate work that *banda* women (in particular) invest in orchestrating them. The level of skill this involves should not be underestimated. Throughout my stay in Kagboro, I watched as my good friend and host, Jacob — a respected elder in Tissana — struggled and repeatedly failed to establish himself as a small-scale fish processor and trader. More days than not, I would see him return home, dejected and empty-handed, complaining, ‘This scramble for fish is just too much’. Eventually, I asked one of Tissana’s most successful businesswomen, Hawa, why it was that Jacob experienced such difficulty, even on days when he had plenty of money to spend; indeed, as you may remember from my description of Tito’s bumper catch, even when there was plenty of fish to be bought. She answered that: ‘Even if you don’t have a *kustoment* [regular trading partner], you can still buy fish, but you have to talk to the fishermen fine; greet them fine; *turn-turn* [cajole; coax] them fine! If you just stand there on the wharf with your money, you won’t get anything!’

As Hawa notes, a bit of strategic flirtation can go a long way to persuading boat owners to sell you their surplus fish; and it may be largely for this reason that Jacob was experiencing such difficulties in what is, after all, a highly gendered role. To repeat a point already made, this this emphasis, on working to create an atmosphere of intimacy and charm in wharf-side transactions, stands in direct contrast to Hawa’s own recollection of a not so distant past when, as she had put it, ‘If you had money, you’d dry; you’d fill your *banda* full — PIM!’. Her response also hints at the moral tensions that so often riddle these gendered relationships of the wharf. Whilst she is perfectly open that her feminine charm is part of what makes her good at her job, the Krio term she uses here — *turn-turn* — is hardly an unambiguously positive one. In fact, it is often used

by people to describe situations where they consider themselves to have been manipulated or conned. In this section, however, I begin by describing another of Tissana's most successful and popular *banda* women.

4.3.1 *Rice and Fish*

A few of Tissana's most respected *banda* women — women like Ami Pa Sufi — had carved for themselves a gendered economic persona of a quite different kind than I have so far been describing. Looking back over my field notes, I find it almost comical how many of my diary entries begin with the words 'I was looking for Ami Pa Sufi, when...' Ami was not an easy person to find. Unlike most of her contemporaries, whose reliance on a single main *kustoment* allowed them a slightly more relaxed working schedule, Ami was constantly on the move; all day, back and forth, meeting one boat after another and shuttling fish, often in small, piecemeal lots, back to her *banda* to be dried. Unable to rely on her husband (who was a heavy drinker and had long since stopped going to sea), she had, over the years, managed to accumulate over a dozen small-scale *kustoments*, mostly young crewmembers who, having arrived in Tissana as strangers, had found in Ami a valuable ally.

When I asked Mohammed, for example, why it was that he chose to work with Ami rather than any of the other *banda* women in town, he immediately emphasised that he valued the mentoring aspect of their relationship:

Sometimes she'll call me; advise me. When I first came here and she didn't know me, she saw that my eyes were red [like a person who has been smoking marijuana] so she took me aside and said, 'Please, you've come from far away to come here; don't get involved in that nonsense!'... We've been *kustoments* for years now'.

Like many of Tissana's Temne fishermen, this was not a life Mohammed had grown up imagining for himself. It was only in adulthood, when the war destroyed his small-town petty trading business, that he had decided to relocate to the fishing town, and try his luck at this radically different livelihood. 'They taught me how to paddle, how to sail, but I was afraid at first, because people die at sea!' However gleefully macho the male fishing culture can sometimes appear, Mohammed's candidness here reminds us that — even for a virile young man — such radical relocation can be as frightening as it is lonely.

Thrust into such an unfamiliar new world, it is hardly surprising he felt comforted by Abi's mentoring concern for his welfare.

But Ami's importance to her *kustoments* went far beyond simple moral support. One evening in the rainy season, I stopped by her *banda* and found her serving up rice from a pot that was — even by Sierra Leonean standards — cavernous. Just as I was wondering what she could possibly be doing with such a vast quantity of food, Mohammed arrived with a pan to collect his own serving. Mohammed lived at least half an hour's walk away, at the other end of town but, not having gone to sea for several weeks, he was more than prepared to make the journey to collect his dinner.

In fact, it is a common feature of the alliance between a *banda* woman and her regular *kustoments* that, just as she can expect to receive frequent gifts of fine fish for her own cooking pot, so she will regularly supply him with cooked food in return. As we have already seen, fishing is, at best, a highly unpredictable business. Even a relatively successful fisherman can never be certain on a day-to-day basis whether he will catch enough to meet his basic household needs so, for those who opt to work with a *banda* woman other than his own wife, receiving this steady food supply from outside his own household can go a long way toward evening out these fluctuating day-to-day insecurities. Gift relations are so embedded within these commercial economic exchanges that the two are mutually dependent and inseparable.

What gives these gifts an added salience is that, in other contexts, people often stress the danger inherent in accepting gifts of food; that, by doing so, you expose yourself to the mercy of your benefactor. Viewed within such an atmosphere of widespread mistrust, the customers' small daily taken-for-granted acts of giving and receiving take on an added salience. It is not simply because circulations of raw and cooked fish neatly mirror the patterns of gift-exchange that take place between a fisherman and his girlfriend; it is that they play such an important role in transforming economic interactions into social ones. By publicly receiving and eating her food each day, the fisherman implicitly resigns himself to the fact that, if she wanted to, his customer could and would use this power to 'influence him' — but that he trusts her not to exploit this power. Even in the absence of any sexual element to their relationship, the result is that not only the economies, but also the identities of their two households begin to blur gently at their boundaries.

Perhaps it is precisely because the flow of food serves so vividly to illustrate — and at once reinforce — the level of faith and mutual dependency which must necessarily develop between them, that such gifts remain conceptually important between *kustoments*; even in cases where the fisherman did not appear to be in any particular ‘need’ of help. As the reluctant head of a large all-female household,³¹ for example, my neighbour Leagbe was struggling financially in a way that her boat-owning *kustoment* almost certainly was not. Yet, almost every evening she would send one of the girls from her compound to carry a pan of rice to Pa Ali, an ex-husband who lived some two miles along the coast with his current wife and family.

Whilst it might appear surprising that Pa Ali should have chosen an ‘ex’-wife to be his main business partner, rather than his current one (whom Leagbe dismissed in private as ‘not serious about business’), marital relations in Tissana — in common with almost forms of social relations, in fact — were characterised by a structural potential for extreme flexibility. It was not at all uncommon for people to use the terms ‘ex-husband’ and ‘husband’, or ‘ex-wife’ and ‘wife’, rather interchangeably; in many cases, these relationships did not so much ‘end’ as fall dormant, always with the capacity to be reconfigured on a different basis at a later date. So, although Leagbe had remarried and divorced three times since first separating from Pa Ali some twenty-five years previously, the reciprocal stream of small gifts between them serves to highlight a continuing ambiguity in their relationship; that, as *kustoments*, there was a sense in which the pair continued to be conceptually linked — if not as a marital unit *per se*, then nonetheless as a ‘couple’ in some broader sense of the word.

4.3.2 *Debt and Fish: Feminine Patronage*

But, returning now to Mohammed, these ‘gifts’ of food were, for him — as for many of Abi’s *kustoments* — far more than a symbolic gesture of goodwill or trust. Not only a poor crew member, but also a ‘stranger’ in Tissana, Mohammed was in a doubly vulnerable position. He worked as a ‘regular crewman’ within a large boat, a position that was considered slightly more prestigious and, in general, more secure than the floating ‘day workers’ who touted their labour to any *boss-man* in need of an extra pair

³¹ Encompassing her elderly mother, a daughter, two granddaughters, a cousin, niece, and recently married daughter-in-law.

of hands. However, if they want to retain their jobs, crewmen are obliged to remain loyal to their boat at all times; even when torn nets or dangerous weather conditions prevent them from going to sea at all. During these periods, in which the crew spend their days mending their nets, some *boss-men* might choose to feed them and give some token amount of ‘cigarette money’.

Some might, but Mohammed was not so lucky.

Throughout the long, rainy season of 2011, Mohammed’s boat was plagued with technical problems. Each time I saw him, he would return my greeting with the same stoical sigh and an ever-mounting tally of his days without earnings: ‘Manageable! Things are only just manageable! But even now, we are still on maintenance; today makes thirty-five days’. Very few crewmen can afford the luxury of saving money; so, particularly for strangers like Mohammed, with no local network of kin to whom they could turn in time of need, these periods of enforced economic inactivity put them under enormous strain. That ‘things were manageable’ at all came down, in large part, to his relationship with Abi:

If we don’t go to sea then we don’t get anything, even if we are working on mending the fishing nets. We have stable *kustoments*. So, if you’re my *kustoment*; any time that I’m broke, I’d come to you and say, ‘Jennifer, I don’t have any money’. You’d lend me something. I don’t pay it back bulk-oh! Small-small, small-small [very gradually]... Even last year, when my woman was pregnant — at that time, I didn’t have any money, so Ami lent me 100,000 leones. I paid it back small-small, until I’ve paid her back now. She never once shouted at me. Me: I like to be secret. I don’t want to expose my business. So that was the thing that made me like her more.

Given that many *banda* women find it increasingly difficult to secure access to a regular supply of fish, it is easy to see the benefit to Ami of keeping her suppliers in debt. As one Plantain Island boat owner explained to me: ‘Yes, they do assist the fishermen, when the fishermen are in need... They can loan them money, after which they don’t pay them with cash. It is the fish that they catch that they pay in return. It is money for fish.’ Perhaps even more significant than this eventual repayment in kind is the fact that, for so long as the debt remains unpaid, it lends their trading relationships an added legal

exclusivity. For, however effectively fish sales may be channelled by love, friendship or habit, it is only when a fisherman owes you *money* that you have the legal right to summon him to court if he sells to another woman. This puts rather a different light on Mohammed's gratitude that, as he was so keen to stress, Ami has never pressured him to repay her anything other than 'small-small, small-small'. Although she never charges her *kustoments* interest on these loans, Ami nonetheless profits directly from their indebtedness to her; for it buys her the loyalty she needs to secure a reliable supply of fish for her *banda*.

It has always been the case in coastal Sierra Leone that, 'aristocratic or especially adept women controlled land, labor, and something we might call capital in both a Firthian sense and a classical economic sense' (MacCormack 2000: 37, cf. Hoffer 1972). Nowadays, in what appears to be an echo of an older, agricultural economy of 'wealth-in-people', large-scale *banda* women like Ami are the only actors in Tissana's economy who continue to invest a substantial amount of their creative energy and material resources, working to accumulate 'people'. There is a substantial body of gender and development literature singling out informal West African markets as the paradigmatic example of how poor women are able, against all their disadvantages, to use commerce 'as an instrument of social and political emancipation' (House-Midamba and Ekechi 1995: xvi; cf. Cornwall 2007; Solomon, 2005: 12). The assumption running through much of this literature is that economic 'empowerment' necessarily entails a heightened sense of individualism: 'In liberal understandings of empowerment, it is *individual* men and women that should participate and that ought, thereby, to be empowered. This is linked to the central role of the rational, self-authoring, autonomous individual self in liberal philosophy and ideology' (Kelsall and Mercer 2003: 294, original emphasis).

However, as we had already begun to see in the previous chapter, Tissana's economy is one in which elements of 'the market' exist alongside — and often in explicit tension *against* — more personalised and socially binding modes of economic relationship. So, far from exercising 'economic autonomy in ways that would free them from the shackles of men' (Cornwall 2007: 150), the most successful businesswomen in Tissana are those who are most effective in *accumulating* close, durable economic partnerships with fishermen. For someone as vulnerable as Mohammed to be so routinely indebted to his far more prosperous and better-connected trading partner, one could easily imagine this

might foster a potentially exploitative power dynamic. Yet, on the contrary: however ‘unequal’ he and Ami may have been in terms of their social and material capital, it is clear from Mohammed’s own account of this rather matriarchal relationship that, far from exploiting him, he considers her to have liberated him from an altogether less appealing power nexus:

Like, you see this problem that I have at the moment, in court? If I went to my *boss-man* and told him, he’d help me. But I don’t want that. I don’t want to be in debt to my boss. I prefer to borrow from my *kustoment*... [because] even if I decided to switch to different boat, I’d keep my *kustoment*.

For a poor crewman like Mohammed, it would be hard to overstate the conceptual importance of this freedom — to ‘decide to switch to a different boat’. The examples Mohammed gives here — of medical costs and court cases — are typical of the kind of unexpected expense that occur now and then in the life of every crewman: and that few are able to afford without turning to someone more prosperous for help. Put in a similar situation, many of his contemporaries opt to borrow money from their *boss-man*. However, as Mohammed explains here, he had excellent reason to fear becoming indebted to his boss in this way: ‘If I borrowed money from [my boss], I’d be frightened to leave him in case he took me to court. The only thing you can do is find another *boss-man* to pay off your debts... then you will work for them instead. It’s a kind of transfer.’ In conversation, people often described these indebted crewmen resembling the one thing young men most fear becoming: ‘like slaves’. For Mohammed, forging a relationship with a strong *banda* woman is a compromise: one that affords him the basic social security than comes from having a patron, without structuring him (too explicitly) in the role of an indentured dependant. However, as we will see in the following section, it is an uneasy compromise.

4.4 Alehn Relationships

It should be clear by now that the one thing all successful *banda* women nowadays have in common is that they have learned to be highly strategic in creating and managing their relationships with fishermen in order to secure access to that seemingly evermore scarce and precious resource. The fact is that, under ‘normal’ circumstances, the myriad small negotiations that go into ‘making’ any relationship as durable and intimate as that

between a fisherman and his long-term customer are simply too many and too subtle to be easily summarised. Emerging as they do from far longer stories of emotional and economic entanglement between two individuals, these relationships extend well beyond the wharf, into kitchens, bedrooms and imaginations around Tissana.

However, there is one context in which customer relationships are forged with a special urgency and a stripped-down simplicity on the wharf. That is when, as is often the case, fishermen take their boats and go ‘on *alehn*’ to base themselves briefly in another fishing town along the coast. There was one thing that all fishermen agreed with equal enthusiasm would never constrain their choice of destination: that is whether or not the crew had any pre-established personal contacts in that particular town. Here, Foday emphasises the strong sense of camaraderie that young crewmen like himself tend to experience on arrival in an unfamiliar fishing town:

Fishermen, we all move around so much; anywhere we go, we are like one big family. We are all brothers. It’s like, if a white man came to Tissana right now, you would have to lodge him, wouldn’t you? You would just have to! Because he is in a strange place, and he is your brother! Well, so it is with us fishermen — any *alehn* you go to, fishermen will welcome you, find you a place to stay, food to eat, even clothes to wear! Yes! They will even take their own trousers and give them to you. They know that, if they came on *alehn* to you, you would do the same for them.

Although they were working hard throughout the day, the houses in Tissana where groups of visiting fishermen were temporarily lodged tended to have a special kind of festive atmosphere about them. Given that *alehning* crews were not enmeshed in any long-term networks of social obligation, a large catch from one of these visiting boats tended to generate even greater commotion on the wharf than a similar catch by a local crew. On such a pristine social playing field, anyone had an equal hope of negotiating a sale of fish. The level of friendly attention they receive is, unsurprisingly, well appreciated by visiting crewmen. If one took a stroll down to Atia Base, Tissana’s main social hub in the evening, and met some *alehning* fishermen there, you could almost guarantee they would be drinking more heavily and flirting with more exuberance than the local men. When I asked this fisherman, visiting from Bonthe, how he was enjoying

his stay in town, his effusive response was typical: ‘Yes! AH! Yes, we like it here! Clearly! This fine, fine *alehn*? They look after us well. Don’t you see how we’re enjoying ourselves here?’

Whatever pay arrangements they may have been used to with their *boss-man* in their home town, crewmen on *alehn* can expect to be lodged together and fed throughout their entire stay away from home, whether that be for a few days or, as is sometimes the case, it stretches to a period of several months. Crewmen were therefore very conscious that these periods away from home ought in theory to provide them a rare opportunity to save money; but equally conscious — as they would often joke when comparing their experiences in Tombo and Plantain — that, for all but the most uncommonly disciplined crewmen, exactly opposite was likely to be the case. With so much fun to be had, Mohammed told me, ‘in Plantain, money won’t stay steady in your hand! You make money fast; but you spend it faster! Most men, when they go on *alehn*, they just spend all their money on women and enjoyment!’

4.4.1 *Two Conflicting Experiences of Space, Freedom and Security*

As rapidly as *alehning* fishermen are able to form new relationships on unfamiliar wharfs, the flip side of this dynamic is predictable. A great many of the women I knew in Tissana were working hard to raise children independently. In some cases, as with my friend, Sungao, we recited the same optimistic conversation almost every time that I saw her for eighteen months, as I watched her baby grow into a toddler; her man, she would always tell me, was just about to come back to fetch her.

And here, I think, we have landed on a fairly fundamental difference between the way that men and women experience their social worlds. For me, as for Sungao, it was the town itself that formed the nexus of the social world as I recognised it. That sprawling jumble of houses and *bandas*, woven through with intricate, long-standing networks of obligation and friendship, appeared to me so substantial. Viewed from this angle, it would have been easy to imagine that such a solid world must surely have occupied a similarly paramount space in fishermen’s emotional landscape; surely the town came first?; surely it remained their key point of reference when they were adrift in that watery world they visited each day?

Indeed, it is true that I did know some fishermen who, any day that they went to sea, would return home, without fail, to Tissana. My friend Abas was one such fisherman. In the eighteen months that he was my neighbour, I never once knew of him to land his canoe anywhere other than directly in front of his wife's own *banda*. Yet Abas was not typical, and in any case, even he had *alehned* extensively in his younger years. So, the same place that appears to a woman, on the land, to be so very solid, so permanent is, to the fishermen who visit it, sometimes no more than an *alehn*; a location etymologically defined by movement, fluidity, impermanence, uncertainty.

The difference in these two gendered experiences serves to highlight the tensions inherent in a kinship system as mutable as Tissana's, in which the momentum toward establishing relationships, and the desire to disentangle oneself from them, are often held in dynamic opposition. Many women live with a palpable sense of insecurity, knowing that their partner is perfectly liable to relocate at a moment's notice, moving to a different wharf town and taking up a new life with a different wife and business partner. In their conversations with me, *banda* women often discussed their anxieties about abandonment (or their experience of it having taken place) in very material terms — as the severing of an economic partnership, which left them far more vulnerable in the aftermath. Marriama's comment here is typical: 'In England, you don't know about difficult marriages.... Would it happen there, like it does here, after you have worked together, and started finally to get some small thing together, the man will just play rascal business, and leave you? Here in Africa it is just so common.'

So the freedom and mobility that fishermen so actively valorise is often experienced as a source of considerable anxiety by the women whose lives and livelihoods are entangled with theirs. Early on in my time at Site, for example, there was a great commotion in my compound when it emerged that one of the young girls I lived with had a boyfriend: Alfred, a young crewman from Tombo, who had joined one of Tissana's larger fishing crews. Aisha was only fifteen years old, and her family were concerned she might be pregnant. Had her boyfriend been a local boy, the families of the two young people would have met together to arrange a formal marriage and negotiate the payment of a dowry; as it was, Aisha's grandfather, Pa Dulai, was worried this young stranger would too easily avoid taking responsibility for Aisha's 'belly':

The thing is, this boy, he didn't come from here. Let me say he is just... passing. So what I predict is that, if we try to take him to court, he'll just disappear. Because we don't know his family. We don't know his people. That's what they [visiting fishermen] do. They come here and cause trouble and then they leave.

Similar anxieties are not new for women in the Upper Guinea region, nor unique to fishing contexts. Over twenty years ago, Caroline Bledsoe (1990a, 1995) discussed the shifting micropolitics of fatherhood in 'modernising' Kpelle and Mende farming communities. At one time, farming men in this region of West Africa would have been eager to claim paternity of as many dependent children as possible. However, the high cost of Western-style education has radically destabilised older models of wealth-in-people. Bledsoe's male informants were left ambivalent as to whether young children should be cherished as a valuable asset, or eschewed as a risky and expensive burden. Yet, despite this ambivalence toward fathering children, the men she interviewed made no effort to avoid impregnating their girlfriends:

The main risk lies not in preventing the birth of children but in definitely claiming fatherhood to them. Claiming fatherhood adds expenses that might be spared by leaving paternity ambiguous until children reach an age at which they may be useful. (1990a: 40)

Young women sometimes hoped that, by getting pregnant, they might succeed in cementing their relationship with a new lover. But such strategies were risky, and met with mixed success, since: 'If a relationship deteriorates, this child can become an economic burden as well as a social hindrance for a woman trying to initiate a new union' (1995: 136). If the social and economic risks of pregnancy are high for vulnerable women in sedentary communities:³² these risks are multiplied in a fishing town where, as Pa Dulai had learned through decades of experience, visiting fishermen 'come here and cause trouble and then they leave'.

Yet, despite their real — and justified — anxieties of abandonment, it would be rather too simplistic to view *banda* women as the guileless victims of their menfolk. Rather, the difference between these two phenomenologies of space serves to highlight the

³² Not to mention the enormous health risks. Sierra Leone has the highest recorded maternal mortality rate in the world. It is estimated that one out of every 21 women die of childbirth related complications over the course of their lifetime (WHO 2014).

tensions inherent in a social world as mutable as Tissana's, in which the momentum toward establishing relationships and the desire to disentangle oneself from them are often held in dynamic opposition.

4.4.2 *Plantain Island Sirens*

There are interesting parallels here between the ways in which gender has come to be mapped onto the coastal topography through everyday practices associated with commercial fishing, and other, much longer-standing patterns of gendered segregation. For as long as we have ethnographic records about Sierra Leone, it has always been the case that people experienced their landscape as powerfully gendered. Young people only become unambiguously male or female following time spent in ritual seclusion in their respective initiation sodalities' bush. Throughout their adult lives, it remains the case that certain important decisions and pivotal life events can only take place safely in gendered seclusion, in the Poro or Bundu society 'bush'.

Bundu and Poro ideology has historically cast as potentially dangerous, but also as powerfully *productive*, any boundary space in which men and women come into contact beyond the careful regulation of sodality laws. Indeed, powerful society elders derive part of their mystique precisely from their ability to flaunt the dangers inherent in these liminal spaces (Bledsoe 1984). In the maritime economy, heightened patterns of male mobility, combined with the importance of heterosexual trading partnerships, create a coastal topography in which men and women routinely find themselves operating across highly charged gendered boundary zones. When *alehning* fishing crews land their boats on the shore of an unfamiliar wharf town, they enter straight into potentially complex economic relationships with women about whom they know almost nothing.

A tiny drop of land just two miles off the coast of the Shenge Peninsula, Plantain Island is Tissana's closest *alehn*. It happens also to be the busiest and most profitable fishing centre in Sierra Leone. In theory, then, a short stay on Plantain ought to be as profitable as it is convenient for Tissana's boat owners. Yet, many of the more experienced captains I knew, claimed to view the island with considerable trepidation. Take Sumaila, for example: as the owner of a boat, rather than a crew member, Sumaila does not dispute the ease with which he would expect to be welcomed into an unfamiliar fishing

town; but he does take a rather more cautious view of this first encounter than Foday's benign description of a universal 'brotherhood of fishermen':

There are so many *alehns*! You can go anywhere you want. If you hear fish are dying in Bauma, you go to Bauma; if you hear fish are dying in Katta, you go to Katta... Even if I have never once been there before, I can go; the only thing is, on the day that I arrive, I should come with fish... That fish there — it is that which will open all my *subabu*. Yes! That fish: it will make them lodge me fine — in a fine place. It will let me live there well, make them give me respect.

As we have seen, *subabu* is a Krio word describing a person's network of useful relationships. It is striking that, in the absence of any pre-existing *subabu*, it is the catch — not the men themselves — that Sumaila credits as having the power to forge these new relationships. Put more bluntly, whereas Foday experiences his new relationships as emerging naturally out of fisherfolk's mutual camaraderie and rules of good hospitality, Ibrahim (as the person responsible for the fish and the money) interprets any social interaction in this strange environment as underpinned by strategic negotiations of a more material kind. And, viewed in this light, it is the feminine attentions of *banda* women that, in particular, come to be viewed with a new suspicion.

Whereas locally based fishermen are almost always tied into long-standing relationships with their female buyers in town, these visiting boats, full of (locally) unattached men, offer a rare opportunity for *banda* women to establish new — if temporary — *kustoment* relationships. But competition is fierce, and women have to act very quickly to claim a new boat when it arrives. Ibrahim's account of what happens when he *alehns* to Plantain Island is typical of the way in which captains and boat owners describe these encounters, with something between attraction and misgiving:

They want your fish; but they want you, too! Like myself, I have a boat, so... the moment my boat lands, the women all come around! They come around and talk to me like they already know me; they'll bring me fine food... She'll come and lean her head on me; she'll just linnnnnger on me now; she'll talk to me cloosely now... that's how they do it. (Kumba, boat owner)

One day in the rainy season, I spent an entire afternoon sheltering from a storm in Kumba's parlour, watching as he and Ibrahim swapped ever-inflating accounts of their encounters with the women on Plantain Island. I had rarely seen the two men so

animated, as they described the extents these women were prepared to go to, in the attempt to entice guileless boat captains into entering a *kustoment* relationship:

Ibrahim and Kumba loved recounting these stories, wide-eyed with a theatrical emotion somewhere between delight and fear. As the rain thundered down outside, they were on their feet moving around Kumba's tiny parlour, taking turns to role-play the different characters. First Kumba was the fearsome seductress, Ibrahim the gormless young fisherman. Now it was Ibrahim's turn to play the Plantain Island siren, sashaying over to where Kumba sat, pretending to laugh coquettishly at his jokes, stroking his arm fawningly. Striking a comedy feminine pose he mimed peeling his skirt up to his waist to seductively remove a stack of cash from the pocket of his tiny skin-tight shorts. ('Even if you don't want to look, you'll look! And as soon as you've looked the medicine has caught you!') Soon, the roles had switched again. Ibrahim lay on the floor in his imagined bed, half-cowering, half-laughing as Kumba tap-tap-tapped gently on his bedroom door, asking in a husky whisper, 'are you that fisherman who just landed today...?'

Here, my own ethnography echoes a thread of literature that has emerged in recent years from Southern and East African fishing communities. A flurry of policy-oriented research has been published over the past decade or so, describing the high rates of 'transactional sex' that supposedly characterise wharf side life across that region³³ (Allison and Janet 2001; Westaway *et al.* 2007; Seeley 2009). In keeping with a much broader set of assumptions, which run as a powerful thread throughout gender and development discourse more generally (Cornwall *et al.* 2007), this literature tends to present women as victims: forced, as a consequence of their extreme economic impoverishment, to 'prostitute themselves' to 'exploitative' fishermen, so as to secure access to a shrinking supply of fish (Geheb and Binns, 1997, cited in Béné 2007: 884).

However, my own experience on the Kagboro Coast is that people were more likely to make exactly the opposite assumption. You may remember, back on Tissana Wharf, Hawa had admitted quite openly that, in the current economic climate, manipulating men — or 'turn-turning' them — is an essential skill for any hopeful fish processor. Faced

³³ In response to evidence that rates of HIV are consistently high in fishing communities.

with a wharf full of unfamiliar *banda* women, all vying to secure his custom, it was Sumaila who described himself feeling dangerously open to sexual predation.

The women who are over there — their eyes are open [they're shrewd]! They know how to catch a man! That's their work right there, Jenny! As soon as you land and they see that you are strangers, the women come over, dressed fine... They ask, 'Who owns this boat? Who owns this boat?' And, if Kumba owns the boat, he's the one with the problem now! And, when it comes to sleep, she'll tell the boat's owner, 'You're sleeping in my room!' And then what's going to happen? Hey? Men, we're fools, we're easy to confuse. You know we're easy to confuse. How are you going to be able to sit in that room, while a woman's pull-pulling all her clothes off? (Ibrahim, boat owner)

One thing that is particularly striking about these tales is that they seem to compress, into a single, highly charged encounter on a foreign wharf, many of the material layers that characterise the longer-term negotiation of gendered economic relations at home. An undercurrent of sexual tension is certainly one facet of that encounter — and the one the men most enjoyed recounting — but it is no coincidence, for example, that both Kumba and Sumaila also mention being given gifts of food and offered loans of cash by the women hoping to win their custom:

If you say that you're there to earn money — that you don't want a girlfriend — they'll say, 'Let me lend you money for petrol.' They have their little handbags, where they keep their money and their half-half *ifohn*, which they put in your food. (Kumba, boat owner)

It is not without good reason that, under normal circumstances, people are extremely wary about whom exactly they agree to accept rice from. As I explore in a little more detail in the following chapter, 'bad medicines' (*ifohn wei*) circulate widely through Kagboro's covert economy, and in a bewildering array of forms. At one extreme — rare and dangerously potent — are substances said to be made from the bodyparts of human victims. But, at the other end of the spectrum, the 'half-half *ifohn*' that Kumba referred to, are a fairly mundane element of day-to-day economic life. Here, for example, Fatti is telling me about her experience living and working on Plantain:

Women come to Plantain from all over the country. They come from Port Loko, Makeni — to work, to make money. When they want to get medicine, they go to

those fetish people, up Temne-line. Those fetish people, they know how to make *dozag*. So they go there; they pay money.

Me: What's *dozag*?

It's a medicine! For turning people's heads [influencing people]. When they want to catch fishermen, that's the one they use. They grind it up, fiiiiiiine — put it in their rice.

Conclusion

It is striking that these highly caricatured images of *banda* women — as powerful sexual-cum-economic predators — are only ever used to describe the women in other *alehns*. I heard men talking in a similar ways about their experiences of visiting Delken, Tombo, and Funkea, too, but always with the same caveat: 'Here in Tissana, our own women's style is different. Our women would be ashamed'. My approach in this chapter is not, therefore, to suggest these stories are an impartial reflection of ethnographic fact, but rather to view them as a playful form of commentary through which fishermen reflect on their experience of the shifting coastal economy.

Anthropologists have often returned, over the years, to the classic argument — made by both Marx (2000 [1946]) and Simmel (1978 [1900]) — that, by enabling people to imagine material transactions as devoid of any moral specificity, liberalised markets are corrosive of social relations. We are by now used to hearing that, for many people in newly capitalised societies, this desocialisation of economic relations is experienced as a source of extreme moral anxiety (e.g. Taussig 1980; Bolten 2008). However, fishermen's most vividly expressed anxieties seem to be focused in exactly the opposite direction. To understand the trepidation my neighbours expressed, as they watched their economic lives become ever more heavily determined by patterns intimacy, debt and social obligation, these changes need to be viewed against a recent historical trajectory in which the rapid growth of the commercial fishing industry had appeared to be ushering in a period of unprecedented personal independence. According to the wistful recollections of my informants, there had been a period on Tissana Wharf, however fleeting, when they seemed to have achieved something close to Simmel's vision of a

monetary system in which ‘man is free — free because he can sell everything, and free because he can buy everything’ (1978 [1900]: 404).

Nowadays, however, fishermen and *banda* women alike look back with nostalgia to that ‘boom’ period through the lens of a present in which the maritime economy is coming under ever-greater pressure. As competition for fish steadily accelerated, an increasing amount of women’s day-to-day labour involves working to create ties of intimacy or obligation with fishermen simply in order to win the opportunity to buy fish. For many fishermen, their greatest concern was that, when faced with women more wily than themselves, they might inadvertently find themselves entangled in sticky webs of obligation, which they had had no intention of entering:

You want to come home, but they don’t allow it. They talk to you fine, they wrap-wrap themselves around you, kiss you... Or, the ones who have money, they take money and lend it to you! They’re bad-oh! So that when the time comes that you’re ready to leave, then they’ll ask you about the money. They say, ‘Eh! You want to go? What about my money? Why don’t you just stay in this water here first? The fish are dying so...’ You sit down. (Kumba, boat owner)

As I explore in more detail in the following chapter, this is a world in which it is impossible to disaggregate the strategies by which people set out to influence one another’s bodies from their broader efforts to build the intimate relationships that enable them to navigate Tissana’s tight economy. The complex ways in which movements of cash, food, sex and ‘fetish’ medicines are implicated in one another in the men’s stories speaks vividly to the intimacy and interdependence that characterise many gendered economic relationships across the Yawri Bay; but also to the deep-seated ambivalences men so often feel, finding themselves drawn into relationships, which are as binding as they are transactional.

Chapter 5: Potato Rope Kinship

When I asked whether Jo Kebbe was Jacob's brother, everyone on the veranda looked baffled, as though they had no idea why I would ask such a question.

'Well,' I tried to explain myself, 'Sento is Jacob's sister, and you just said that she's Jo Kebbe's sister so I thought...?'

'No!'

'They're family!' Aminata explained, as though this blanket term ought to iron out any remaining confusion as to how, exactly, the three people were related. But Buema was not prepared to accept such a facile explanation:

'They are not family! What family? Jo Kebbe is a Kebbe! Jacob is a Yannie! What family is that?'

'So...?' It was my turn to look baffled now. 'Why would he go to Sento for help?'

Inspired, Buema leapt to her feet, 'Have you heard of a potato rope family?' Without pausing to wait for an answer, she took two potato stems from the bench beside her and began to mime planting them in the concrete ground of the veranda. 'This one; you plant it here. You see? And the other one; the other one is all the way over...' She was bending double now, holding the two bundles as far apart as her stretched arm span would allow, 'here! But this rope, it grows like so. And the other one, it grows like... so... until...'

Slowly, she drew the two stems towards one another along the ground, revelling in her own performance. 'They meet and join and look like one rope! Do you see?' She straightened up, triumphant. 'That is what we call a potato rope family!'

The 'potato rope' would be a particularly vivid metaphor for anyone in Tissana. Although only a small minority of households in this fishing town find the time or labour to farm on any significant scale, almost all keep at least some small kitchen garden in which they grow vegetables for their own domestic use. By far the most widespread and lowest maintenance of all garden plants are the cassava and the sweet potato; each grown, not

only for their starchy tubers, but also for the leaves that form that basis of '*plassas*', the staple, daily accompaniment to rice and fish. In the dry season, potatoes are planted in gardens near watering holes a short walk from town, but during the rainy season small potato patches spring up on every scrap of spare land around town: on the edges of compounds, between houses and on path sides. 'Picking *plassas*' is one of the most basic daily household chores, and might be entrusted to a child as young as five. There is no one, in other words, who is unfamiliar with the way a potato rope grows.

Sweet potato vines are cut in short, naked lengths, and planted in small bunches, each a foot or two away from their nearest neighbour across the bare earth. Yet, in contrast to cassava stems, which when they grow each maintain their integrity as individual plants, potato ropes have altogether less respect for personal boundaries. Within a couple of months of being planted, those fragile, isolated stems have grown into such a luscious tangle of roots, leaves and tubers that — as Buema mimed so vividly to us on the veranda — 'they look like one rope'.

Writing twenty years ago, Liisa Malkki had criticised a tendency amongst social scientists at the time to naturalise people's relationship to places through arboreal metaphors of 'rootedness'. Her concern had been that, when people's identities are defined as arising naturally from an ancestral history embedded in the land, it fosters a vision of population movement as inherently pathological (1992: 27). Buema's botanical image of a sweet potato vine achieved something quite different, providing a template for imagining how, in this highly volatile social world, unrelated strangers might become as entangled with one another as if they had been related all their lives.

This chapter begins (in **Section 5.1**), by exploring what it is about the material and economic conditions of life in the Yawri Bay, which has led people in Tissana to develop such 'rhizomorphous' approaches to family relatedness. Throughout the first section, I focus on the creativity and flexibility of this model for reckoning kinship. I describe the most obvious and materially visible ways in which migratory fishermen are able to produce kinship ties where none had existed before: by giving gifts of fish to strangers on the wharf.

In **Section 5.2** I describe how the town's massive daily gift economy in raw fish and cooked rice can be read as a throbbing, ever-shifting map of each person's network of

friendships, flirtations and ‘potato rope kin’. Beneath this image of munificence and mutual generosity, a rather more ambivalent picture begins to emerge, in which people are required to work – and work *hard* – simply to re-create the kinship relations they rely upon for their survival. Finally, I end by reflecting on the complex expressions of power that are sometimes smuggled alongside gifts of rice. In an economy in which ‘fetish’ medicines are commonly understood to be widely in circulation, gifts of rice are both the substance of survival and also, potentially, a potent expression of power.

5.1 Metaphors of Movement and Belonging: Roots, Flows, Potato Ropes

The prevailing tone of anthropological writing has shifted significantly since Malkki highlighted the ubiquitous use of language ‘rooting’ particular peoples in particular places. She had been at the vanguard of an important move to refocus ethnographic attention away from neatly compartmentalised ‘indigenous cultures’ towards those things — refugees, migrants, knowledge, contraband — which challenge cartographic boundaries by ‘flowing’ across them (cf. Nordstrom 2007; Mol and Law 1994). Over the past couple of decades, it is watery idioms rather than botanical ones that have come to dominate scholarly discussions of how social lives play out across physical topographies (Appadurai 1994; Tsing 2000). One result of this burgeoning ‘oceanisation’ discourse is that we have come to privilege an image of seascapes, not as a series of actual lived places but, instead, as an engine for theoretical analogy, seeming to epitomise the restless movement that characterises certain aspects of the postmodern era (Ballinger 2006: 155; Helmreich 2011).

Yet, viewed from the perspective of seagoing fishermen, the Yawri Bay conforms rather neatly to this image of waterscapes and spaces of movement and connectivity. We have seen over the previous two chapters that Tissana’s fishermen often place a strong ideological emphasis on the aspiration to personal freedom. Perhaps the most vivid expression of this aspiration is the way in which they explicitly valorise their fluid migratory patterns. ‘Just as the fish migrate, so, too, the fishermen migrate... The fish go, the fishermen go. The fish stop, fishermen themselves stop. Anywhere they go, the fishermen will go there, too’ (Ben, boat owner, Plantain Island). It was common for

fishermen to make this rhetorical analogy between their own fluid, unpredictable migrations and the equally unsettled movements of their fishy quarry, unseen beneath the water's surface. In this sense, one sees surprising analogies, not only to the imagery, but also even to the ideological overtones of certain post-structuralist literature, the writers of whom (rather optimistically, perhaps) projected the emergence of new kinds of subjects: people who might '[relinquish] all idea, desire, nostalgia for fixity' (Braidotti 1994: 22; cf. Deleuze and Guattari 2004 [1987]: 421; Cresswell 2006: 54).

However, for academics and fishermen alike, these images of unbounded fluidity are the projection of an *ideal*, as much as they are descriptions of a lived reality. When Deleuze and Guattari refer to their 'nomadic subject', for example, the figure they describe — who 'can be called the Deterritorialised *par excellence*... precisely because there is no reterritorialisation *afterwards*' (2004 [1987]: 421) — was not written on the basis of any ethnographically observed nomadic population (Cresswell 2006: 54), but rather *against* their own experience of life in a modern nation-state. Similarly, we saw in Chapter 1 that the fishermen's aspirations to unconstrained movement need to be understood — in part at least — as an attempt to assert their rejection of a much older and more explicitly 'arboreal' model for reckoning power, in which kinship, social belonging and personhood were all heavily predetermined by a person's roots in the land.

As Anna Tsing has warned, such imagery brings with it the risk that we overlook or undervalue the experience of those 'local folks who are still stuck inside [local situations]' (Tsing 2000: 346). There are a couple of senses in which Tsing's caveat is important in the case of Tissana, both of which I have already touched on in previous chapters. Firstly, the surface of the Yawri Bay is far from being a 'friction-free' (Wigen 2007: 721) boundary blurring substance: for it is only fishermen who are able to move across it. Secondly, however much fishermen might value the promise of 'liberation' that comes from their seemingly rootless mobility, in an economy this tight, complete unattached 'freedom' would be a risky ideal to aspire to indeed. In a marine environment as stretched as the Yawri Bay, most people depend for their most basic daily material security on being enmeshed in strong networks of social ties. It is at this juncture — between heightened forms of mobility on one hand, and the urgent material need for social connectedness, on the other — that we can begin to imagine the importance of the kind of kinship structures Buema was describing when she told me about 'potato rope families'.

5.1.1 *A Place Defined by Movement?*

It was migrants from Ghana who first introduced the practice of '*alehning*' to this coastline in the 1960s (Marquette *et al.* 2002, see Chapter 2). For anthropologists familiar with the ethnography of fishing, the pattern is familiar. Earlier ethnographies of fishermen further south along the Guinea Coast described them following regular annual circuits in synchrony with the predictable seasonal movements of shoaling fish (Jorion 1988; Wyllie 1969; Marquette *et al.* 2002); and when I first began asking fishermen in Tissana to explain where and how they decide to migrate, they often began by recounting a similarly neat pattern. Abas was expressing a commonly expressed wisdom, for example, when he told me:

Well, fish swim against the wind. So, during the harmattan, when the winds blow from the land [December to March], the fish come up close to the coast. At that time, we really catch a lot of fish here! That is the time when this place really fills up. (Abas, boat owner)

However, my own experience in Tissana is that neither the fish nor the men who attempt to track their movements were nearly as predictable as these models suggest. As another boat owner told me on a different occasion, it does not matter how many years' experience one has of the sea, the movements of fish, unseen beneath the water's surface, are inherently capricious: 'Where [the fish] go — it is only God who decides that' (Asana). Indeed, there were long periods during the harmattan season when people in Tissana were consistently frustrated by the small size of the catches that were being landed on their wharf. So, in fact, when Ben had claimed that 'anywhere [the fish] go, the fishermen will go there, too', what he was describing was an aspiration, and one that is rather difficult to achieve. If ever they had followed such a regular pattern, nowadays a combination of outboard engines and mobile phone technology has made it possible for captains to move much more intuitively, relying on hearsay to judge, day by day, whether it might be worth trying their luck in a different fishing town:

There are so many *alehns*. My own boat has just gone to Tombo – we hear the fish are dying there just now. They will go and lodge for one week, they will look at how the fishing conditions are there. If they see the catch is poor, then they'll come back here... Or perhaps I'll call them, and say, 'Come! Come over here! Fish are here!' (Timbo, boat owner, Tissana)

This one word, *alehn*, captures much of what is distinct about not only the lifestyle, but also the position from which the Yawri Bay's fishermen view their world. As you may have noticed, it has two slightly different meanings. In one sense, to *alehn* is a verb: to move, to migrate fluidly through the water, often not knowing with any certainty where one might settle, or for how long. In its other usage, an *alehn* is also a place. It is the generic name that migratory fishermen give to 'other' coastal towns viewed from the sea: a location etymologically defined by movement and impermanence. In this second sense, Plantain Island stood in the imaginations of my neighbours in Tissana as the 'purest' example of an *alehn* they knew: a dynamic, unstable town, through which every cliché of fishing life could be illustrated. Having been established as a makeshift camp in the late-1950s, this 'temporary' outpost rapidly burgeoned into the most frenetically busy fishing centre in Sierra Leone. Nowadays, Plantain's beach is incessantly busy with boats being hauled out into the sea or back up onto the sand (see Figure 13). As fishermen jostle directly with traders on the beach, everywhere one looks people are pulling fish from nets, packing dried fish, negotiating a deal:

This is the area, here, where money *flows*! We have fishermen here from as far as Senegal — yes. And we have traders coming from Bo, from Kenema, Moyamba, all over the country!... You can't sit down and idle here — just sit down and relax. Oh no! Those who go to sea, go to sea. Those who sell, sell. Those who buy, buy. That's it! That's the way we move here! (Sufyan, boat owner, Plantain)

The language Sufyan uses here to describe his island home as a node in wider oceanic currents of migrant fishermen, cash and trade goods calls to mind Hau'ofa's (1993) description of the Pacific Ocean as a 'sea of islands'. Rather than being separated by the expanses of water between them, Sierra Leone's *alehns* appear, from this perspective, as punctuation points in a social universe that is inherently liquid. The most experienced captains are highly tuned to the shifting dynamics across their watery region: not only where other boats are experiencing fishing success, but also how the prices are fluctuating at different points around the coast:

In every *alehn*, the price can change. Like here in Tissana, for now, they buy *bonga* for 700 leones per dozen... But right now in Plantain, they're buying them for 1,500 leones per dozen. Now-now-now! The difference is too much! So people decide to leave here and go to Plantain.

Me: How do you come to know the price in another alehn?

The communication now is very close now we have mobile phones. But even without telephones, there are many so many fishermen here in Tissana. Maybe one fisherman will go and land in Plantain, then come home and say, ‘Eh man! In Plantain they are buying fish 1,500 — we waste our fish here! Let us go and land in Plantain’ (Mohammed, boat owner)

Viewed from the sea, then, the first impression one gets of the Yawri Bay is a world of incessant, restless movement. In this vision of the Yawri Bay’s social universe, not only the ocean itself, but also even the settlements that surround it are defined by flux: by the constant, shifting streams of people, fish and money that flow through them.

5.1.2 *The Anxiety of Impermanence*

However, there is another sense in which Plantain seems to epitomise fishermen’s ideological commitment to fluidity over stasis. For despite the fact that ‘no town in Kagboro booms like Plantain’ (Tom, elder, Shenge), the settlement retains, all these decades after it was first established, a certain sense of impermanence. Despite all the vivid evidence of people making and circulating money, my neighbours in Tissana often commented on how visibly dilapidated Plantain is. In Tissana, my neighbours understood this juxtaposition — of profit and decay — through the logic that Plantain Islanders are *archetypical* fisherfolk. Always half-ready to up-anchor and set sail for a new wharf town, they would prefer to spend money on a new boat than invest their resources into the buildings and infrastructure of a place to which they had limited commitment. We already began to see in the previous chapter that, for the women, children and non-seafaring men who make up the majority of Tissana’s population, this chronic lack of stability is more likely to be experienced as a source of *anxiety* than of liberation.

I am certainly not the first ethnographer to suggest that, in certain contexts, ‘kinship can be viewed as a process of becoming’ (Carsten 1991: 435; cf. Sahlins 2011: 3). Nor is it any coincidence, I think, that the best-known examples of ‘creative’ or ‘aspirational’ kinship patterns tend to be found in studies of populations living in precarious or unpredictable conditions. From refugees (McGovern 2012; Malkki 1992) to boom town migrants (Walsh

2003), one way of navigating the narrow line between material scarcity and population fluidity is to develop strategies for forging vital social relationships ‘on the fly’ (McGovern 2012: 748); if necessary abandoning and reforging them afresh with different people when circumstances change once more.

Even here, in the Upper Guinea region, family lineages in rural communities are rarely quite as stable — or ‘arboreal’ — as public genealogical histories purport them to be. Even here, on the Upper Guinea Coast, ethnographers have long acknowledged that biology is only one facet in the process by which people become related. Across this region, membership of a corporate group — ‘whether a household, a lineage [or] a patrimonial network’ — is something to be strived for, rather than assumed (Knörr and Filho 2010: 10). Most of this literature is based on descriptions of small-scale hunter-farming communities, and describes a social structure in which powerless ‘strangers’ were absorbed, first as fostered children, or tenant farmers, and eventually (in the manner of a potato rope, if you like) as in-laws or ‘nephews’ within the lineages of established local families (Little 1967 [1951]; Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962; d’Azevedo 1962a). These patterns of ‘aspirational kinship’, which evolved in the context of many centuries of endemic warfare and population displacement, became vitally important once more in recent decades as millions of people across the Upper Guinea region were forced to flee their homes and seek refuge in a foreign village under conditions of real danger or precarity (McGovern 2012: 748).

However, these dynamics are played out in a land-based economy, in which ‘strangeness’ remains a highly stigmatised position — even at a depth of several generations (Sarró 2010; Berliner 2010). Such appealingly elegant models fail to capture the complexity and inner contradictions of the fluid fishing economy, where vital social relationships are often forged, abandoned and reforged afresh with remarkable dynamism. As such, the work people invest in nurturing potentially valuable relationships is held in dynamic tension with an equally powerful imperative to disentangle themselves from unwanted responsibilities (cf. Bolten 2008: 3). The resulting tangle of ‘potato rope’ relationships bears little resemblance to the neatly hierarchical lineage system described by earlier anthropologists.

My purpose in the remaining part of this chapter is to begin to describe some of the practical material ways in which people are able to transform casual acquaintances into

kin. There are multiple threads in the work people invest into building and managing their ‘potato rope’ kinship but I begin, in the following section, with the most obvious. In Tissana, fish are the basis of almost every meal, the foundation of almost every household economy, and the focus of a thousand daily dramas, large and small. Indeed, from my own vantage point on the wharf, watching as they slid along various convoluted channels of love and obligation, these slippery exchanges sometimes appeared to me to be the very substance out of which Tissana’s social fabric was made.

5.1.3 *Becoming Kin*

One morning, when I joined the cluster of breakfast customers on the low benches of Fatmata’s makeshift ‘cookery’, I found them — over the usual plastic bowls of fish soup and cassava — listening attentively to a fashionably dressed young stranger, Victor, a school student visiting his uncle for the holidays. By the time I arrived, he had already been holding forth for some time on the charms and conveniences of his home town on Sierra Leone’s northern coast:

‘Our own roads in Lungi³⁴ are all tarred; not like this sand you have here... When I come here — oh! — I really feel that I am in the village. If you could see Lungi, you would not believe it. You’d think, “This is Heaven!”’ Then, abruptly, his tone changed. For there was one count on which, even Victor was prepared to admit, life in Tissana easily surpassed that in his hometown. ‘But when I go back there, I’m going to boast to all my friends; I’ll tell them that I’ve been eating loads and loads of fish!’

In one respect, his comment was nothing unfamiliar. If ever I asked people what they appreciated most about life in Tissana, their answers tended to stick closely to a simple, predictable script: ‘Here’ — I could almost guarantee they would reply — ‘we eat fine fish!’ And yet, it did surprise me that this particular stranger should have been so impressed by the coastal diet. Was Lungi not also a fishing town?

‘Yes, but, if I want to eat fish in Lungi’, he explained, ‘I have to pay for it. At home, I can’t just go to the wharf and expect someone to give me fish, free, like

³⁴ On Sierra Leone’s northern Bullom coast, Lungi may once have had rather a lot in common with Tissana. However, as home to the national airport and only a short ferry ride from Freetown, the town has been targeted for some fairly extensive infrastructural development over the past decades.

they do for me here. No way! Except, maybe, if you are lucky to have a brother with a boat, maybe then he will give you something... but my brothers don't have boats — so, me, I have to buy'.

As a young, unknown man, with little money and almost no connections in town, it is not immediately evident why local fishermen would choose to instigate a gift relationship with someone like Victor. As we have seen, the Yawri Bay's population is so fluid that it is commonplace for people to arrive in Tissana with no existing social network at all. My suggesting in this section is that the massive traffic in gifts of fish, which circulate each day across Tissana's wharf, provides one of the important material routes by which newcomers are able to become integrated into the town's sprawling network of potato rope kinship.

Victor's words both mirror — and, in important ways, differ from — those of a more long-term settler in the town. Having spent his childhood and young adult life in Bo, David had also grown up accustomed to a level of urban convenience truly luxurious by Tissana's standards. Sitting outside his thatched house, he admits that he sometimes misses the electricity, the smooth roads, and once taken-for-granted peace of mind that had come from living within easy reach of decent medical care. And yet, he told me, he feels more prosperous in Tissana than he ever had done in the city:

The first thing is that, here, we eat fish! Without buying! Even if my own boat did not get fish, I will go to my brothers when they 'slam' [return to land]; they will give me something to support my family...

Although both men place equal emphasis on the connection between gifts of fish and bonds of 'brotherhood', the Tissana fisherman is describing a quite different flow of causality between the two. Whilst Victor had stressed that in his own home town, not being lucky enough to have a brother with a boat, he would never be given fish; David — who in fact has no biological kin in Tissana — refers to all those men who gift him fish as his 'brothers'.

David is by now well established in Tissana. He is married to one of the town's best-known *banda* women, and has a three-man *yele* boat of his own. His crewmen — both strangers themselves — live in his home with him and his family. Yet, when he first arrived, a decade earlier, he had had neither the fishing knowledge, the financial capital,

nor the good *subabu* that one might think would be necessary to set himself up in the town. He goes on to explain how, in his first few months in Tissana, more established fishermen had allowed him to subsist by scavenging the shrimps from their fishing nets:

When I first came here, I didn't know how to fish. I didn't even understand water. But when the others went to sea, to draw *sim*-boat on the sandbar, I would follow them there. I'd pick-pick the shrimps... But then, I began to think: 'going to beg to my companions like this every day;; it's such a strain!' So then, after watching them, I began fishing for myself, with a hook and line first of all.

According to David's own narrative, it was this initial willingness of the town's fishermen to give him fish — a complete newcomer — that not only allowed him to subsist through those first difficult months on the coast, but also began the gradual process of his integration into the social fabric of Tissana. These small, initial gifts were the tangible beginnings of the relationships with men he now considers to be his 'brothers'. Now himself an active member of Tissana's fishing economy, perhaps it is hardly surprising that he was eager to stress that he extends a similar generosity to the strangers on the wharf who might one day become his kin:

They say that in, like, Lungi, Goderich... Mama Beach, Funkea [all fishing towns further north along Sierra Leone's coast] they will only give you fish if you are a friend or family, or if you are loving with him... it wouldn't happen there, like it does here, that somebody would give you fish without any good relationship... If you come here as a stranger, someone will come to you, give you fish, saying, 'this is a stranger!' We so like strangers!

Given that they often lead such mobile lives — and so routinely find themselves cast in the role of 'stranger' in another *alehn* — perhaps it is hardly surprising that Tissana's fishermen tended to place such particular ideological emphasis on their willingness to give to outsiders. You may remember Foday, in the previous chapter, explaining that all the Yawri Bay's fishermen resemble 'one big family'; that he felt confident he would be greeted and offered hospitality in any wharf town. The parallels with the ways in which David amalgamates the expectation of material generosity with a sense of assumed 'kinship' are striking. Foday's faith that he can consider any fisherman his 'brother' is predicated on a faith in the intricate gossamer web of material reciprocity that ultimately links every migratory fisherman to every other, constructing them all — even

two strangers viewing one another for the first time in their lives — as though each were already established to the other as ‘donor’ and ‘benefactor’ in equal measure.

We saw in David’s own account of his arrival in Tissana that these small, seemingly free-floating acts of material kindness might, over time, sediment into something altogether more substantial. Out of the loose suspension of gift-giving that is Tissana’s *wap* economy, his network of ‘potato rope kinship’ eventually settled. However, if the impression I have given so far is that it is *easy* to build and maintain social networks through material gifts, I ought to stress that only a tiny fraction of *wap* relationships are likely to formalise into anything resembling a stable kinship bond. In Tissana, ‘becoming’ kin requires consistent material investment, and relationships that are not nurtured in this way, can rapidly atrophy and fail. To illustrate this point, I turn in the following section to look at some of the patterns by which fish flowed into, and rice was shared within, my own complex, adoptive household.

5.2 The Substance of Relatedness

The once-grand compound in which I lived was home to an ever-shifting population of around thirty people, too fluid and fissured to be thought of as a single ‘domestic unit’ in any straightforward sense. Some people did consider it their permanent home: Pa Bimbola, Mama Yebu and Jacob, for example, had all lived there for most of the past three decades. Around this small core of long-term residents, other people — relatives, friends, fostered youngsters and strangers — would come, lodge for a while and move off again as their circumstances changed. There were usually at least a few teenage boys and young men sleeping on the parlour floor, whilst Buema, Si Mary and Mama Yebu all routinely rearranged their bedrooms to accommodate a couple of extra residents for a period of weeks or months.

For the duration of time that they lived there, most of Site’s residents attached themselves, with a greater or lesser degree of clarity, to one of the loose units that formed around the different cooking pots in the kitchen. Each of the adults who ate from that pot was expected to contribute to it, whether in cash, fish or garden produce. Although these units had some of the characteristics of what we might call ‘a family’,

they were not always — and certainly not only — defined by genealogical patterns of relatedness.

Over any one period, there were usually two to four cooking pots active within the compound. In the churning social dynamics of Site, however, these social units were in a perpetual state of arising, dissolving and reforming again in different constellations. At the core of this fluid social world one pot was larger, generally better provisioned and more stable than the rest. Throughout my stay, the rice in this pot was bought largely by myself or Jacob, and the fish was usually provisioned by Buema and shared by a loose collection of people whom I came to think of as my foster family.

Because this compound was larger than most, it is fair to say its population was also more complex and fractured than most. However, in a town of peripatetic fishermen and traders, a similarly dynamic pattern was far from being unique. It was rare for domestic arrangements in Tissana to bear much resemblance to the ‘English term household... [which] implies a special intimacy, a fusing of physiological functions and a real distinction from other types of social relations’ (Harris 1981: 139). What interests me here, more than the physical migrations of people in and out of the building itself, is that, even within this single large compound, patterns of social networks were in a constant state of flux — often in direct response to people’s success, or failure, to attract a flow of *plassas* fish (fish for household consumption) in their direction.

There are two basic opposing principles that combine to make the strategic pursuit of ‘*plassas*’ fish such a constant preoccupation in Tissana. On one hand — and perhaps this is hardly surprising in a place where one sees baskets, *bandas* and glittering *baff*-fulls of fish almost everywhere one turns — people expect to eat fish every day. A central theme in the myth Tissana’s residents narrate about their town is that, whoever you are, you will ‘eat loads of fine fish’. People who had migrated from towns and villages inland would remember with pity their impoverished diet ‘up-country’ when they had been forced to make do for their meagre protein on the small, dried, bony fish (*bonga*) that provide the staple source of protein for all but the most prosperous of Sierra Leoneans inland. These ‘poor fish’ — as they were sometimes referred to dismissively in Tissana — may have been the foundation of the town’s trade economy, but they were only eaten here as a matter of last resort.

Yet in apparently perfect contradiction to this attitude, the surprising reality is that, for all their seemingly glorious abundance, it is almost impossible to buy fish for one's own household consumption. Here, Marriama is trying to explain what initially appeared to me a rather baffling inconsistency:

It's not every fisherman who will agree to sell you one or two fish. If you were to go and ask, 'Sell-gi [sell-give] me fish, I want to cook,' there aren't many who would agree to sell you them. If you want fish to eat, you have to beg.

It stands as testimony to Marriama's comment that even the presence of a Western visitor in the house — cash-rich by any local standard — did almost nothing to diminish the amount of work Buema was forced to invest, finding fish for our cooking pot each day.

Over time, I came to realise that it is not simply that fishermen and *banda* women do not want to sell their catch piecemeal to their neighbours in town, but also that important structural dynamics within Tissana's fish trade often prevent them from doing so. As I explore in more detail in the following chapter, fishermen are typically tied into a more or less exclusive customer relationship with a single *banda* woman who has first claim to buy and dry as much of his catch as she is able. She, in turn, will usually be tied into similarly binding relationships with her trader-customers from the city. Anything sold on the wharf is therefore destined to be passed through a predetermined chain of business relationships until it arrives, wholesale, in a distant urban marketplace. The result is that alongside the for-profit market trade runs a parallel and equally vibrant non-monetary system, in which fish are exchanged according to an altogether different set of rules.

5.2.1 *Love and Fish*

The Krio word for this commonplace act of fish-giving is to *wap*. It would be difficult to overstate the real, material urgency of this gift economy, which provides the main source of protein for many of Tissana's residents. I was often taken aback by the heights of anxiety my friends experienced on the days when they had been unable to procure fish. Regardless of how much other food they might have had, a cooking pot devoid of fish is a source of great stigma in Tissana, and is generally taken as evidence of a social unit failing to provide for its members the most taken for granted of basic living necessities. During the rainy season in particular, these days occurred far more

frequently than one might imagine, listening to the common optimistic assertions that ‘Here, we eat like gentry’.

A constant preoccupation within all non-fishing households, including my own, was how to secure gifts of fish. As a woman, it is a taken-for-granted fact that the best way to secure a reliable supply of *plassas* fish is to ‘love’ with a fisherman. The flow of fine fish into our own cooking pot fluctuated wildly depending on the ups and downs of Buema’s relationship with our neighbour — a married man who lived nearby with his family. I recorded this conversation on a day when Buema was particularly buoyant, having just received a visit from her lover:

When I got home, Buema was glowing. ‘Did you see my fish? Over there, by the well — go and look’. I went over to inspect the two beautiful red snappers, and gasped my appreciation. ‘Fine, eh? Abdul brought them for me! He went to sea today, and he didn’t get anything at all. Just those two fish. And he gave them to me!’

‘Yema [his wife] must be angry...’ I said, which delighted her.

‘Hahaha! Yeah, Yema’s mad! But they’re Abdul’s fish and he gave them to me. So let Yema be angry!’

As Buema’s easy dismissal of Yema’s anger suggests, she expected her affair with the other woman’s husband to be tolerated, however begrudgingly. Although men in Sierra Leone are permitted, by custom, to marry multiple wives (Crosby 1937; Little 1967 [1951]), fully polygamous households are rare in Tissana. On the other hand, separation, remarriage and a whole spectrum of extramarital ‘love’ relationships are extremely common for both men and women. Many of these ostensibly ‘illicit’ affairs — like Buema’s relationship with Abdul — were veiled with only the faintest token gestures toward secrecy; and in fact, more often than not, were broadcast perfectly publicly in the daylight movements of large fish, from the boats of fishermen to the kitchens of their lovers.

Not without good reason, married women typically worked a lot harder than their husbands to keep their extramarital romances secret. One of the most disturbing moments of my entire spell in Sierra Leone took place when another member of my compound returned home earlier than expected from visiting his family in another town, and found his wife gutting an impressive fish. Taken by surprise, and unable to improvise

a quick explanation for the fish's provenance, Gilo's infidelity had been self-evident. Although no one was seriously hurt, the scene of violence that followed had been quite terrifying.

To a sharp observer, the movements of gifts of fish around town could be read as a map of the ever-shifting patterns of 'loving' in Tissana. People often asked me quite openly, for example, whether I was having an affair with my married friend, Kumba, because he was so often seen walking through town carrying large fish in the direction of our compound. In fact, his gifts were not motivated by love, but debt (but that is a different story).

In discussions of fishing communities elsewhere in Africa, similar patterns of gift-giving are often pathologised under the term 'fish-for-sex' and read as evidence of sexual exploitation (Allison and Janet 2001; Béné 2007; Seeley 2009; Westaway *et al.* 2007). Such language fails to do justice to the kinds of romances characteristic of Tissana's social life that, in my own experience, were usually underpinned by a very real thread of attraction and sentiment. That said, it is undeniable that single women (and sometimes married ones, too) do have an important material incentive to initiate these kinds of 'love' relationships, which become a key element of their basic livelihood strategies (cf. Leach 1994: 198-199). Here, as anthropologists have discussed elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, 'affect and exchange are entangled rather than opposed... material provision and emotional attachment [are] mutually constitutive' (Thomas and Cole 2009: 20; Cornwall 2002).

When Buema finally called off her affair with Abdul, her daily workload increased quite dramatically, as we joined the many other households for whom 'begging' on the wharf was a constant daily chore. Disgruntled that most of this substantial new responsibility had fallen directly on her shoulders, she attempted to cajole her fifteen-year-old sister, Momi, into taking some of the work:

Buema: Momi's a young girl! But she never goes down wharf [to beg]. She's lazy!

Momi: [Laughing] Eh! You know what people'd say, if I went down wharf to beg, even twice in a week... D'you know what they'd say, Jenny? They'd say I had a boyfriend!

Young girls' sexuality was the subject of much closer moral scrutiny than that of grown mature divorcees like Buema. This short exchange reveals the difficult balance that young women are asked to navigate: half-expected — even obliged — to exploit their sexuality to cajole fish for their household's cooking pot, but risking stigmatisation if they do so with too much enthusiasm. However, if the word 'beg' appears to suggest images of deferential supplication, in Tissana it has quite different connotations. 'Begging' is viewed instead as a form of labour.

5.2.2 *Begging on the Wharf*

Throughout the day in Tissana, almost everyone's attention is trained, even if only from the corner of their eye, towards the ocean: waiting. Then, within moments of landing on Tissana Wharf, a successful fishing boat will already be surrounded by a crowd, ready for what my friend Jacob was fond of calling 'the scramble for fish'. In a sometimes bewildering clamour of flirtation, begging and bullying, a tangled web of negotiations is played out on the sand between the fishermen in the boat, their customers, girlfriends, neighbours and debtors, as each person attempts to cajole for themselves a portion of the catch.

Prominent amongst these crowds are the professional fish processors (*banda* women), marked out by the distinctive, brightly coloured rubber tubs (*baffs*) that broadcast their desire to buy fish in bulk; and — to adopt the term local people often use to emphasise the difference between these monetary transactions and the plethora of other exchanges that crowd the wharf — to buy them 'for physical money'. In Chapter 5 I return to focus in more detail on the complex social negotiations that underpin these commercial exchanges, between fishermen and the women who buy and dry their fish. As I have already suggested, however, *banda* women are by no means the only people who gather on the wharf each day in search of fish.

Invariably, for example, at the landing site of the largest fishing vessels, one can expect to meet at least a dozen or so women, sitting on the sand with baskets of fruit, coconuts and fresh vegetables gathered from the bush or cultivated in gardens around town. This loose knot of petty traders spend much of the day straying up and down the wharf,

matching their long pauses on the sand to coincide with the arrival of Tissana's largest crew-boats. For there is only one currency accepted in this mobile market — and it is not cash, but fish. Each item has a certain fixed price, counted in the small 'measure fish'³⁵ that dominate the catch of every sim-boat net.³⁶ In 2011, the going rate for a small bunch of bananas had been six of these measure fish, for example; a mango cost three; a pawpaw, twelve.

Aside from bartering fish for fruit and veg on the wharf, one of the things that struck me most when I first arrived in Tissana — just as it had struck Victor — was the frequency with which both fishermen and *banda* women agreed to give some of their hard-earned fish away, apparently free to the people who came to beg from them on the wharf. This excerpt from my field notes was written on a day that I had gone fishing with the sim-boat crew. The scene it describes took place just after the large crew of men, women and children had spent several long hours wading waist-deep through the shallows, in order to guide the long fishing net in an arc around the beach:

Buema's own performance was remarkable. She arrived at the shore just as the net was finally being dragged ashore, involved herself in someone else's argument, gossiped for a bit, and then turned to me expectantly: 'So where are your own fish, Jenny?' I explained that they hadn't paid me yet, but when they did, I wanted to use the fish to barter for a pawpaw. Immediately, she was on her feet and in action: picking through, helping herself to small fish in the net; wandering around the various *banda* women's *baffs* scattered around the sand; taking one fish here, one there; until, within minutes, she had gathered the two dozen fish needed to buy a pawpaw.

I left her to go back down the wharf in search of my flip-flops, and, by the time I returned twenty minutes later, her plastic bag was bulging with fine fish; far more than any junior member of the fishing crew had been paid for their hours of hard work. 'How did you manage to get all those?' I asked, incredulous, as we walked home. 'You really know how to beg!' Buema laughed. 'I beg, and I *barranta* [bully]. I begged them by force!' She paused on the path, to lean over

³⁵ So-named because they are too small to be counted by the dozen and, wherever they are bought, sold or given in payment to crew members, will instead be measured in one of several standard-sized pans.

³⁶ Which are more tight-meshed than those of other boats.

mimicking herself. ‘I take them from people’s *baff*-pans. I say, “Aren’t you going to give me this one? And this one? Come on, I beg you! I have my stranger to cook for!”’ Her expression was cheeky and she threw her head back and laughed at herself. ‘People tell me, “Stop! Buema! You’re more shameless than your daughter, Abi!”’

On other days, when fish are less plentiful, begging is no easy job. However committed fishermen might be to the *ideal* of giving generously on the wharf — the reality is that they only do so on days when they land a bountiful catch. During the rainy season, in particular, there were days when almost every woman I greeted walking through Tissana replied with a dejected ‘I’m hungry! There’s no fish!’ Sometimes, I spent hours trailing Buema on the beach, going to meet one boat after another, as she flirted and pleaded and bullied until, finally, one of her friends or relatives, tired from a long day at sea, agreed to give us something. So strong is the expectation that friendly relationships ought to be made — and made material — through material exchanges of this kind that Buema could hardly contain her frustration that my own apparent ‘popularity’ never quite manifested itself into a flood of fish:

Everywhere we go, they all greet you — ‘Jennifer! Jennifer!’ But they don’t give you anything! Oh, it makes me so angry for you! If they were to say, ‘Jennifer, Jennifer, Look, take this fish!’ — Now, that would be fine!

5.2.3 *Collapsing Potato Rope Kinship*

Maurice Bloch has argued that ‘sharing food is, and is always seen to be, in some way or another, the sharing of that which will cause, or at least maintain, a common substance among those who commune together’ (1999: 133). Perhaps there is some truth in Bloch’s suggestion that, in ‘every’ social context, eating together is a powerful expression of personal intimacy and ‘common substance’. However, it seems obvious that the micropolitics of food-sharing take on a completely different tenor in a world – such as Tissana’s – where households routinely spend their entire income on food; where many people move from one day to the next unsure where their next meal is coming from. In a context where most people have had the experience of going to bed without managing to eat at all, food sharing takes on an emotional and practical urgency that most people in wealthy countries would find difficult to relate to.

Within my own compound, the patterns by which rice was shared and exchanged between the different pots tended to be a fairly accurate map of the patterns of goodwill between residents. Living under such cramped conditions, tempers were very often running high. In amongst all the laughter, the gossip, the intimate sharing of one another's small joys and strains, there were also frequent bursts of frustration and acrimony. The micropolitics of sharing and withholding food were the largest single source of tension, resentment and, sometimes, hunger.

There is a rich literature in social anthropology examining how people accrete kinship relations through marriage, adoption and fostering. However, ethnographers have historically paid far more attention to the way in which people may sever certain relationships, or allow others to atrophy. It was Caroline Bledsoe's fieldwork in Sierra Leone that led her to make this important observation:

Arguments that groups are shaped socially must acknowledge equally the opposite potential: eliminating some ties and rendering others marginal. Divorce and infanticide are examples. However, radical efforts to sever ties are measures of last resort. Dissatisfaction between spouses, for example, is usually expressed more subtly, by neglecting sexual or domestic duties. It may also be expressed by marginalising individuals. (1995: 130)

In Tissana, many people are living under such extreme material pressure, they are routinely forced to make extraordinarily tough choices: about which of their most intimate personal relations they can materially afford to nurture; and which they can morally and emotionally afford to neglect. And, just as gifts of fish or rice can instigate and nurture relationships, so, too, my field notes are filled with examples of relationships beginning to unravel and collapse because there were no fish to bind them together. Without gifts of fish, for example, girlfriends lose interest in their lovers, and people are ashamed to visit their relatives inland. I saw with one of the families in my own compound that, without the consistent presence of a cooking pot full of fish to hold them together, even fragile domestic units begin to dissolve, and family members scatter in search of other, more materially viable living arrangements.

Aminata had arrived at Site with five of her children, having recently fallen out with her mother in a nearby compound. With a newborn baby to care for, and a petty trading business to run, Aminata was struggling: only rarely did she find time to go down to the wharf and beg for fish. So strong is the stigma against feeding one's family 'dry rice' [without fish] that, on the days that Aminata had not received any gift of fish, she simply would not cook — even if she had money. Instead, she (like many other people in Tissana) relied on the hope that one of her neighbours would share their food with her. I often heard Aminata complaining bitterly, that none of her wider family or neighbours had any interest in helping her. Speaking behind her back, Buema agreed that her friend would find it difficult to persuade anyone to share her material responsibilities. 'This is what makes men afraid of Aminata. When they see how many children she has, they're afraid to marry her. They don't want to take all those children and have to feed them all'. Such a statement could hardly stand in sharper contrast to earlier accounts of Sierra Leonean kinship, in which (as we saw in Chapter 1) it was taken for granted that relatively wealthier people would strive to accumulate as many wives, foster children and tenants as possible.

For days on end, Aminata's cooking pot could sit cold and empty. And, although they continued to sleep under the same roof, I watched over the course of my fieldwork as all three of her teenage children sought ways to distance themselves from a family unit that appeared to be collapsing. Thirteen-year-old Ibrahim took to selling kerosene in order to pay for his own food. Ima and Marie, on the other hand, worked increasingly hard to attach themselves to alternative cooking pots, spending their days in the compounds of aunts and grandparents, offering to do chores, and so to be fed by these other relatives. Fostering is an extremely common practice in Tissana. Sometimes, as we saw with Abu in Chapter 3, young people are sent by their parents in a distant part of the country to live with relatives on the coast. It is just as common for children to move between households much more organically, because their current guardians were simply no longer able to provide for them. The chances are that Ima and Marie would eventually be absorbed into another household, enmeshed in new, if fragile, webs of potato rope kinship.

5.2.4 *The Dangers of 'Becoming' Kin*

Elsewhere in the Mandé world, ethnographers have described infants continuing to develop biological bonds of relatedness after birth, absorbing the material substance of kinship through their mother's milk: milk, which is stimulated and fortified by the man's semen through continued sexual intercourse (Fortier 2001; Cros 1990; Fairhead *et al.* 2006). In Tissana, by contrast, the women I knew were careful to abstain from sex whilst breastfeeding, explaining that, if mixed with maternal milk, semen becomes a dangerous contaminant:

It's bad for the baby, because you mix the blood. If a woman sleeps with her husband, then feeds her baby, unless you use that powder milk, the baby will get very sick. It will toilet, toilet, toilet, toilet, it will get very thin. (Adamse, *banda* woman)

Yet, in quite different ways it was possible for the substance of relatedness to pass between a child and the people closest to their mother: not through bodily substances shared in sex, but in food.

Ever since he arrived in town, everyone has been very keen for me to meet Ba Yannie [Jacob's grandson]. 'Have you seen him yet? He looks like your own kind.' When the little boy was finally brought to visit me, his friend pointed to his nose. 'You see? White people went to his village when his mother was pregnant and gave her rice'. This morning, Buema repeated the same thing, pointing to Ba Yannie's hair: 'His hair — Even if they let it grow, it's just like yours. It's smooooooth. It's soft, do you see it? Those white men went to Mofante with [food] supplies for the *kumbras* [breastfeeding mothers]. That's why he looks like one of you.'

There are echoes here of Janet Carsten's well-known description of relatedness in a Malaysian fishing community, where individuals come to embody their kinship identity only gradually, over the course of their lifetime, through the continuous process of giving, receiving and consuming food together. In Tissana, much as she described, 'it is clear that not only is 'social' identity... unfixed, but 'physical' identity, a person's substance, is also continuously acquired and alterable' (1995: 225).

However, if this language of 'giving', 'sharing' and 'becoming kin' appears to imply selfless munificence, it is worth remembering that kinship itself 'often carries ambivalent or negative qualities, which anthropologists tend to dwell on rather less' (Carsten 2013:

245; cf. Peletz 2000; Lambek 2011). Many of Tissana's foster parents were conscientious, loving carers to the children in their custody. However, it was taken for granted that foster children were often expected to work the hardest, for the least reward, in order to justify their position in the household. To illustrate this tension, here is Buema's aunt, Sento, describing the sacrifices she made over her long career as a foster mother:

Buema, and all of them, it was me who brought them all up. Yes! ... Right now, I've got eleven here, who go to school: all on the back of this fish that I sell! Even just now, a Ndema fisherman just came and left his son with me. He's not my relative! He just came here on *alehn*, and when he left, he asked to leave his boy here with me. To foster is not easy-oh! Strain! I manage, though; I endure. Before school, they eat. When they come out of school, they eat! It's not easy. I don't have money-oh! I don't have anything, but I do have patience.

To see the two women together today, joking on the wharf, you would have no reason to question Sento's portrayal of herself as a beneficent matriarch. However, this is how Buema remembers her young adulthood spent working under her aunt's 'parental care':

I strained for that woman! Ah! I suffered for her. I was just working non-stop, in the *banda* [smokehouse]. You've seen that big-big *banda* she has? I didn't have time for anything else, I worked so hard! As my head hit the ground, no more, I was getting up again! At that time, my body was not fine, like it is now. I was thin-thin-thin! I didn't rest.

Here, Finda is contemplating the fine line between familial care and labour exploitation she observed in the home of one of her neighbours, a large-scale fish processor who, even by Tissanan standards, fostered an unusually high number of her relatives' children:

Do you see all the children she has there? Some go to school, some don't go to school... Her own children are all at boarding school. But her sister's children now: some are just there to work — to pull water from the well, to dry fish, nothing more! ... If it was England, they'd say it was against 'human rights', wouldn't they? But in a place like Tissana, there are no 'human rights'.

Viewed from this perspective, the intimacy expressed by food sharing can easily slide toward a visceral expression of power. The former politician Pa Thomas, by far the most infamous local big-man in Tissana's living memory, had been famous at the height of his political career for the lavish generosity with which he distributed food to supporters

and opponents alike (see Figure 14). Throughout his ministerial career he had reserved a significant portion of his government budget to keep a store house in Tissana piled high with sacks of rice: ‘We still have the pots now. You’ve seen them? Big-big-big! ... Anyone who came here to visit Pa Thomas, they’d eat till they were belly-full — *pim!* There was always rice for that’ (Pa Dulai, Site).

However, Pa Thomas is far from being a wholly benign figure in Tissana’s collective memory. His leadership was characterised by such levels of political intimidation that, in many people’s estimation, there had been sinister overtones to the ‘generosity’ that enabled him to manipulate a poor electorate. ‘If ever someone came to him wanting to raise a dispute with him, he’d say, “Come, come, first, let’s eat!” He used to say, “When a person has your sweat in their belly, they can do you no harm!”’ (Hawa, *banda* woman, Tissana). The big-man’s comment could be read as a figurative expression of a much more diffuse dynamic of patronage, whereby one would expect material support (including food) to be repaid with loyalty and political allegiance.

However, in other contexts, people were explicit in drawing a much more literal connection between consuming food cooked in another person’s kitchen, and surrendering control over one’s body and social agency. Jacob was constantly urging me to be more careful in this regard: ‘If they offer you rice when you go down [to the other end of town], don’t eat it! Do you hear? If they give you raw fish, that’s fine, but not cooked food!’ The reason for his caution was the common belief that *ifohn wei* (bad medicine) is in wide circulation in Tissana. ‘They might have put something in it’, he would warn me, sagely, ‘to influence you’. Sensing the resilience of his guest’s naïveté, he would never tire of trying to impress the urgency of this lesson upon me, a lesson that most of Tissana’s residents had learned from early childhood. ‘We are all Africans. We know each other! We know our ways. We are tricky people.’ For his part, Jacob insisted there were fewer than a handful of close family members whose cooking he would be prepared to eat. Any other gifts were politely accepted and discreetly disposed of.

Describing a population of educated Freetonians in the 1970s, Harrell-Bond encountered a similar pattern, whereby giving and receiving gifts of cooked food was amongst the most common ways of nurturing relationships. Yet, ‘despite [this] emphasis upon

sociability expressed through sharing of food... professionals are highly concerned about the possibility of being poisoned' (Harrell-Bond 1978: 238). As we saw in the previous chapter, it was partly because *alehning* fishermen knew they would have no choice but to accept food cooked by strangers that they claimed to feel so exposed to manipulation and entrapment whenever they spent the night in a foreign wharf town. In this sense, hungry children like Ima and Marie are amongst the most vulnerable people in Tissana — not only because they were often undernourished, but also because their poverty placed them at the mercy of anyone who was prepared to feed them.

Conclusions

In contrast to farming villages inland, where livelihoods are shaped by slow cycles of agricultural fertility, here economic life is based upon a resource that is itself ceaselessly, unpredictably mobile. My focus in this chapter has been to contemplate how people in Tissana navigate their livelihoods, and their sense of belonging, at the juncture between two seemingly opposed forces. On one hand, people in the Yawri Bay — and fishermen in particular — have begun over the past couple of generations to lead extremely mobile, often unpredictable lives. Yet, however much fishermen emphasise the spontaneity of their migration patterns, in an economy as tight and as unpredictable as Tissana's individuals' sense of material security continues to rely heavily upon having a strong network of personal relationships (*subabu*). Viewed against a broader regional context in which people's basic well-being is typically assumed to depend upon their being surrounded by supportive kin, the instability of Tissana's social world is experienced by many people as a source of profound (and justified) *anxiety*. For Tissana's residents, just as Appadurai has described of Mumbai's urban poor:

In many ways life is an effort to produce, if not the illusion, then the sense of stability, or continuity, or something like permanence in the face of the known temporariness or volatility of almost all the arrangements of social life — who is where, who can you love, what's available, where do you live. (Appadurai 2003: 46)

Viewed in this light, the work of building potato rope kinship needs to be seen not *only* as an attempt to create alternatives to the rigid hierarchies of rural life, fixed and 'rooted' in the land (Malkki 1992), but also as the unavoidable, all-consuming daily struggle to construct some sense of material security from a reality in which one's kin

are sometimes liable to leave town at any moment. And it is not a struggle at which everyone succeeds. In a context in which relationships must be materially made and remade, rather than simply assumed, 'potato rope' relationships are sometimes liable to collapse as easily as they were formed.

Chapter 6: Fishing, Thieving, Witchcraft: Hidden Topographies of Survival

This region of West Africa is famed for the extent to which every level of social discourse it permeated with an atmosphere of ‘secrecy’. Across the Upper Guinea Coast, ethnographers have consistently found that, even in the smallest villages — places where one might imagine it would be almost impossible to keep anything hidden from one’s neighbours for long — people invest considerable energy infusing their words and actions with multiple layers of ambiguity (Bellman 1981; d’Azevedo 1962b; Ferme 2001; Gable 1997; Murphy 1998; Piot 1993).

Yet, even as anthropologists have explored in exhaustive detail the extent to which people work to create around themselves the charisma that comes from possessing hidden knowledge, they have less often paid attention to an inevitable corollary of all this assumed secrecy: the pervasive, anxiety-inducing sense that other people know important things that they do not (Mair *et al.* 2012). If you ask any Sherbro speaker how they are, they are likely to respond, with a shrug: *La lo, ke la honon mu!* (‘whatever is there, it hasn’t revealed itself yet!’). This half-joking statement is repeated many hundreds of times a day in Tissana, as acquaintances exchange casual greetings. The familiar words both reflect, and simultaneously work to reinforce, the pervasive sense of felt ignorance and half-trust that characterise many aspects of social life on this coast.

My goal in this chapter is to explore how this *episteme* of secrecy and ignorance explodes beyond the seemingly ‘ritual’ world, to shape people’s experience of their everyday economic order. In the vibrant rumour mill that animates everyday conversation in the fishing town, there is one anxiety that everybody shares. Boat owners, fishermen and *banda* women alike: all were attempting to navigate their tight

livelihoods through a world in which much of what effected them directly was hidden from their view.

Insofar as the sea has figured in my previous chapters, my emphasis has been on the ways in which it sustains, connects and divides the different wharf towns around its coastline. In this chapter, I emphasise that the ocean is itself is a highly complex, densely populated social world: a world of which, the women and boat owners on the shore are palpably aware, their knowledge is extremely limited. After sketching an image of that oceanic world as it appeared in the accounts of my male informants, I expand my view of Kagboro's topography to consider another space, hidden from public view. Here, as elsewhere in Sierra Leone, it is taken for granted that certain individuals — amongst them twins, witches and diviners — possess an extra set of eyes, and that this privileged vision enables them access to a hidden social space, mapped onto the surface of the visible landscape.

From the late-1990s, a growing number of Africanist ethnographers became interested in exploring the plethora of creative forms, in which local discourses about witches were multiplying and adapting, often in ways that ethnographers interpreted as 'critiquing' the new transnational forms of economic exploitation. The image that emerges through these analyses is one in which people's fears about the violence of the occult appear as a vivid metaphor for the 'real' structural violence of the postcolonial world order (see Chapter 1). As one of best known proponents of this genre, Rosalind Shaw paints a vivid image of the hypermodern dystopia Sierra Leonean witches are said to inhabit: 'where skyscrapers adjoin houses of gold and diamonds... street vendors roast 'beefsticks' (kebabs) of human meat... and witch airports dispatch planes... to destinations around the globe' (2002: 202).

Tissana's witches have rather more local ambitions. Beginning with a discussion of the 'witch-eyed' fishermen who are able to hear fish moving beneath the water's surface, I seek to emphasise that people in Tissana do not always assume 'witches' to be 'evil' by nature. What I explore in the second section of this chapter, however, is how the multiple layers of hiddenness that riddle this coastal topography work to reinforce people's conviction that their neighbours are acting out all manner of covert and nefarious strategies just beyond their frame of vision. In the final section, I reflect on how these experiences of uncertainty and half-trust are refracted through a broader

‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ (2001: 7), in which Sierra Leoneans are taught from a young age both to value — and to *anticipate* from their neighbours — a certain level of creative deception.

6.1 The Social Seascape

I sat with Hawa on the wharf one morning, as she pointed out the different boats in the distance, calling each of the sailors by name as they slid towards the horizon. To her trained eye, each of those retreating boats was as instantly recognisable as the fisherman’s face would have been, according to the distinctive pattern of its colourful patchwork sail. ‘Like, my man’s sail, for example, it’s red and orange. So when I come to the beach, I can see him straight away.’

There had been a time — only a few decades ago — when it had been common for Tissana’s boats to spend their entire day fishing in the shallow waters within sight of the shore. It does still happen, occasionally, that shoals of *bonga* congregate in the waters immediately around the Shenge Peninsula. On these days, if you stand on the beach and look out to sea, the water seems to be teeming with slow-motion activity. During lulls in more interesting gossip, women on the wharf would often look up, and idly point out to one another which fishing grounds looked to be popular that day, and where the different individual fishermen (entirely indistinguishable to my eye) were coming from or going to land.

Yet, however rich this sheltered coastal shelf may once have been, we saw in Chapter 4 that these shallowest inshore waters have been rapidly decimated in recent decades by the profusion of unsustainable dragnet techniques. This decline in the fertility of Tissana’s most local waters has combined with improved seafaring technology, to foster the emergence of a quite different kind of fishing culture: one in which men routinely travel far greater distances each day in search of fish. Nowadays, boat captains begin their days by listening to the rumours circulating amongst their fellow fishermen, about which of the Yawri Bay’s many fishing grounds have recently seen fish ‘dying’ in the greatest numbers. Even in the absence of any specific piece of intelligence, they know their greatest chance of landing a decent catch is to make their way directly into deeper waters — and beyond the view of those of us on land.

It has become fashionable across anthropology to enlist images of watery ‘fluids’ wherever we want to allude to the increased mobility and interconnectivity of the globalising world (Helmreich 2011). However, as we have begun to see over the past two chapters certainly does not hold true for everyone in Tissana that the sea figures in their lives as a medium of free movement and frictionless connectivity. On the contrary, for the town’s non-seafaring residents the watery horizon is more likely to appear as a barrier through which they watch others pass, but beyond which they can neither move nor see. I return later in this chapter to explore the implications, for those on the coast, of living with the knowledge that much of what affects their livelihoods most takes place in a seascape hidden tantalisingly beyond their view. Before returning to the land, however, I want first to develop a stronger sense of the social and spatial dimensions of the world into which the fishermen disappear each day.

There is a second respect in which my ethnography speaks to this growing ‘oceanisation’ discourse. For, even whilst social scientists refer ever more often to economies defined by ‘fluid’ movements of peoples, things and ideas, the dominant image we have come to accept of waterscapes themselves is of a curiously flat, socially characterless space: albeit one that we now expect to connect people and places, rather than separate them. As Kären Wigen notes here, a continuing oversight of research exploring the social life of ocean basins is that ‘sea space... comes across as essentially a two-dimensional (and practically friction-free) surface for the coming and going of ships’ (Wigen 2006: 720).

Tim Ingold epitomises this attitude rather neatly in his statement that ‘we humans stake out our differences on the land; the sea, however, is a great dissolver — of time, of history, of cultural distinction’ (1994: x). However, for the many thousands of working fishermen who make their living from the Yawri Bay, this small, intensively utilised seascape is anything but a ‘great dissolver’. When Tissana’s fishermen go to sea each day, they may leave behind the relationships that characterise their social lives on the land, but they enter another equally complex social world, every bit as riven through with rivalries, conflicts and secret alliances.

I had been living in Tissana for almost a year before, one morning, a visiting boat owner from Plantain Island had taken a long stick and sketched me a map of the Yawri Bay in sandy ground outside Pa Sila’a cookery. Aside from the coastline, which I recognised

easily enough, Tomi's map revealed a topography altogether unfamiliar to me. He did not bother to mark any of the villages, roads or rivers, which I tended to think of as the region's most prominent landmarks. Rather, he carefully parcelled out an intricate mosaic of distinct watery spaces, the defining characteristics of which — the depths of their seabed and the strengths of their currents — were all utterly invisible to me. To the far side of Plantain Island, for example, Tomi marked a series of small fishing grounds running away from the coast toward the Atlantic Ocean. He pointed to them in turn — 'Konah, Kaisa, Pokeh, Katatabul' — and explained how each differed from its neighbouring fishing ground in some important aspect of its invisible, underwater terrain. Beyond that, where the continental shelf slides off into the deep Atlantic: 'We call that "Open", that's the big, deep sea, there, where those trawlers pass. It can be rough there. Then here, all along here, between Bompeh and Konah grounds, there is a deep channel of water. We call that "Gutta [gutter] Ground"'.

Although he carefully labelled these deeper waters into small, named grounds, Tomi's map dismissed the entire wide, shallow shelf along the coast of the Shenge Peninsula as an undifferentiated non-fishing ground, which he referred to as 'Bar'. Like most fishermen based on Plantain Island, his fishing equipment was unsuitable for these inshore waters. If he cast his twenty-fathom (36 metres)-wide net here, where the seabed lies only seven fathoms (12 metres) beneath the surface, they would almost certainly tear. Tissanen fishermen, by contrast, tend to use narrower nets and do still class these shallow seas as a series of distinct fishing grounds, albeit ones that they expect ever less often to provide them with a bounteous catch. For their part, they can only reach deeper waters by heading out beyond Plantain. It is partly for this reason that even the most homebody of Tissanen fishermen so often opt to save their fuel money — or even better their aching muscles — by passing the night 'on *alehn*' on Plantain.

It was Tomi's map that had first revealed to me just what a clear sense experienced fishermen have of the hidden, three-dimensional topography they traverse each day in their boats. But he also emphasised what a thoroughly populated and highly socialised space these fishing grounds around Plantain had become. 'First time', he told me, 'when you went to sea, you were on your own'. Captains had relied purely on their experience to intuit where the fish might be concentrated in the ocean. Depending on the tide, the season and weather conditions, a knowledgeable man could look at the water and make

an informed guess as to where he might find fish. But really, he readily admitted, fish are not that predictable: ‘where they go — it is only God who decides that’.

The density of boats working in the Yawri Bay’s waters has increased dramatically in recent decades. This, combined with the introduction of mobile phones five years earlier, has radically changed the social character of the sea: transforming it into a space in which fishing boats are far less isolated than they once had been:

There are over a hundred and fifty boats now, on Plantain.³⁷ When we go to sea, we all scatter. But now, it’s not like before. We can communicate. If I’ve got a friend in another boat he might call me, and say, ‘Are the fish dying where you are? Because here at Poke Ground, there are loads!’ The fish — they don’t scatter in the sea, you know? They move in groups — so it can happen sometimes that there are loads in one place. So then I’d just ace my engine, and I can be there quick-quick. Because, before, we had to paddle, but now God has given us these engines, so it’s easy.

The image Tomi painted, of fishermen generously collaborating to help one another at sea, is only one part of the picture. Most of the men I asked agreed it is fairly rare to encounter fish in such massive numbers that it warrants actively inviting another boat to come and share in the plenty. In fact, in an environment where all men are essentially competing to catch the same shoals of fish, the dynamic between different fishing boats is more often one of intense, sport-like rivalry.

Travelling aboard one of the large passenger canoes (*pampas*) that commute twice weekly from Tombo to Shenge, the journey gave me and the other women on-board a tantalising glimpse of a male world from which we were usually excluded. In the rainy season, these journeys could be hair-raising — and dangerous. In the dry season, however, when the surface of the Yawri Bay is as calm and smooth as a millpond, the crossing usually passes without drama (see Figure 10). If the weather is clear, one barely loses sight of Freetown’s mountains before the low-lying houses and trees of Plantain Island appear over the horizon ahead. In every direction, brightly painted fishing boats are scattered motionless across the glassy surface of the sea.

³⁷ As recently as the 1960s, Plantain had been home to a single family.

At moments like this, one had a clear sense of the sea as a densely populated social space. The fishing grounds to the north of Shenge are deeper than those to its south and west, and are favoured by larger, so-called ‘Ghana’ or ‘channel’ boats, with their deeper nets and crews of fifteen to twenty men. In the course of a three-hour *pampa* journey, we might pass close enough to shout greetings to the men aboard a dozen or more of these boats, as they stood under the glaring sun, patiently scanning the horizon about them, scrutinising the water for evidence of hidden fish, shoaling just beneath the surface: ‘Yes, when you see them all like that, near-near to one another, it means that the fish are there. In all those boats, they are all watching, watching, watching the water’ (Yusef, crewman). Seeing these multiple boatloads of fishermen scanning the same waters for the same shoals of fish, it would be easy to forget the possibility that each crew set sail from a different wharf town that morning. Occasionally, we happened to pass one of these large boats just at the moment when its crew had broken their vigil. Their engine would be on full blast, churning the water behind them, as the boat swerved to intercept a shoal of fish they had spotted. All the men on-board were in motion, working rapidly as a team, to cast their net before any of the boats nearby were able to move to catch the same fish. On another occasion, my *pampa* passed a crew just as they were hauling their net from the water. From our cramped perches along the edge of the passenger canoe, we all turned and craned to see what kind of catch they had landed:

‘Do you see those men there? They’re pulling their net! Ah! That’s hard work, there!’

‘Look at all those fish! They are happy today! Look, the other crews are all watching them.’

And it was true. The sea was so congested that day that three or four other similarly sized boats were close enough in the water to have an easy view of the successful fishermen. The others had not cast their nets yet, and were standing watching as their rivals dragged their heavy, glittering catch from the sea. As our *pampa* slid through the water between them, the tension had felt palpable. I recalled Pa Brima’s comment, only a few days previously in Tissana, that: ‘In the town, you see us, we fishermen all have one heart. But when I’m at sea, I don’t want any man to get more than me!’. Here, Mohammed paints a vivid image of the kinds of strategic games played out between rival crews as they compete against one another in the sea:

When you're all there in an open place. That boat is standing there; that one is standing there; that one is standing there: they're all watching, watching, they are all watching to see. Perhaps I might be standing here, but I can see there are fish over there [behind you]. I don't hurry-oh! I paddle small-small, I come. I paddle small-small, I come. I paddle small-small, I come.... If I see fish in the water near your boat, I wouldn't call to tell you they were there-oh! No! I'd wait... wait... wait... for the right moment... then, BAM! – I'd heave my net. Whoever casts their net first, it's done! Even if you were right there, closer to the fish than me, you don't have the right to cast your net now.

Parallel attempts to capitalise upon 'knowledge differentials' are an essential characteristic of many economic environments — from the stock market to the bazaar (Geertz 1978; Walsh 2004; Berry 2007). Yet there can be little doubt that fisheries have certain particular material characteristics that work to infuse this competition with a heightened sense of urgency. In a context in which everyone in the sea is vying to catch the same evasive resource, then very often the only thing separating a triumphant boat from the many others who return home empty-handed is the fact that one crew learned, fractionally faster than its rivals, where exactly the fish were to be found.

Indeed, it is a recurring characteristic of oceanic life, in otherwise disparate fishing cultures around the world, that intense competition is often paired with 'clear signs of secrecy, misinformation, and deceit' (Palmer 1990: 157; cf. Andersen 1980; Acheson 1981). As Mark Busse reminds us here, 'The materiality of property matters. The kinds of property claims that can be made depend upon the materiality of the things being claimed' (Busse 2012: 120). Or, as Pa Brima had gone on to put it, rather more pithily, 'Fish get problem-oh!' If there can be any doubt as to the depth of the competition felt between rival crews, fishermen often told me that it was common for tensions to erupt into violence:

It's a war! It's a war! It's like this: you see fish — the distance is there, far over there. I see them, too. I want to go and catch them — you also want to catch them. So you'll paddle; I'll paddle fast to try and go and catch them. Fishermen can fight at sea-oh! Eeeee, bone to bone! Physical! Boats, they can come near to each other, like this – FIGHT! They know how to fight at sea. (Alusine, crewman)

Yes, they can fight! Sometimes they heave broken bottles at one another! At the sea now, some people, they cuss-cuss-cuss — abusive language! When they go to sea, all men are trying to fish. (Usifu, crewman)

In theory, men who fight at sea are subject to the same laws as those who fight in town, and ought to receive a fairly heavy fine from the town chief for such aggressive behaviour. However, as Alusine goes on to describe here, fishermen collaborate to keep a clear separation between the two social worlds — ensuring that the details of their individual antagonisms remain largely invisible to their neighbours on the land:

For example, you and me, we fight at sea. You catch. Me, I don't have anything. When we land, I'll go to you, you'd *wap* for me [give me a gift of fish]. So we take it now as something fun. When we're here on land, we just take it up as a joke. I'd say, 'Ah Jennifer — the other day, when we were at sea, don't you remember how I hit you?' We all laugh. But when we were out at sea, it was serious. EH! Serious! If anyone did that in town, it would be a major problem. But it doesn't come to town.

We are beginning to get a sense, then, of the complex layers of partially obscured vision that riddle Tissana's seascape. On one hand — and I return to this important point in more detail shortly — non-seafaring fisherfolk, left behind on the shore, are ever-conscious of this disquieting fact: however crucial the sea is to their own fragile livelihoods, they can never know with any certainty what is taking place in that maritime world across the horizon. Yet even if we remain, for now, with the seagoing fishermen themselves, it is clear that what knowledge they possess of their work environment is, by definition, slippery. Regardless of how experienced a boat's captain might be, there is more to mastering that endlessly fluid environment than accumulating a static corpus of knowledge. Aside from steering across a topography, the physical contours of which are hidden from view beneath the water, fishermen are also working to navigate an equally complex field of socially produced knowledge, in which their friends and colleagues in other boats are as likely working to distort or conceal important information as they are to share it.

6.2 Where the Fishing Economy and the Esoteric Episteme Intersect

As we have already seen, this pattern of daily gamesman-like competition to access, manipulate and conceal knowledge from one's neighbours has as much to do with the inherent material limitations and opportunities of fishing environments, as it does any underlying 'cultural' disposition (Palmer 1990). Nonetheless, one thing that is particularly fascinating, watching these dynamics played in this particular region of West Africa, is that, when rival boats vie for up-to-the-moment information, they do so within a very particular epistemological context. One in which:

Many see power in all its forms — spiritual, social, political and economic — as related to the possession of secrets, whether secret knowledge or secret object(s)... [O]ne of the certainties in a world characterised by considerable uncertainty, is that there are many secrets. Moreover, in this way of thinking, it is an incontrovertible fact that people have differential access to such secrets. (Soares 2005: 130)

Within Sierra Leone, this dynamic is neatly encapsulated in the initiation societies that play such a central role in customary politics. Valuable esoteric knowledge is dispensed by society elders to more members only frugally and piecemeal, in ways that reinforce the mysterious charisma of those in power (Murphy 1980; Bledsoe and Robey 1986).

However, a person's access to powerful knowledge is not *only* determined by their structural position within society. In a context in which 'it is taken for granted that all people are hungry for knowledge' (d'Azevedo 1962b: 14), this 'esoteric episteme' (cf. Brenner 2000) also allows for the possibility that potent secrets are concealed within the everyday material world, available to be acquired and exploited by anyone with sufficient interpretive skills. Discussing the Mende region in which she carried out her fieldwork in the 1980s, Mariane Ferme describes a topography in which '[t]he perceptual domain is destabilised by forces that inhabit features of the landscape, that lie beneath the surface of solids and fluids' (2001: 5). Moving through a world so densely populated with unseen forces, her Mende informants understood that even 'poor strangers... may

become rich and powerful through the strategic, though illicit, exploitation of secret knowledge of the landscape' (ibid: 2).

Across the Mandé world, of which Sherbroland forms a periphery, it is forest hunters who are most often credited with the heightened ability to read subtle clues in the landscape, and so to access the potentially powerful forces concealed just beneath the surface of the visible world. In inland parts of Kagboro Chiefdom, where people rely heavily on bush meat as one of their main sources of animal protein, hunters are important figures in their community, and not *only* because they provide their neighbours with access to a much-coveted food resource. Here, as elsewhere in rural Sierra Leone, hunters' skills — to see what others cannot — qualify them as individuals with an uncommon depth of wisdom and insight, 'great knowers' (Ferme 2001: 27) in a much broader sense. Here, Pa Lunsar is telling me about his friend and neighbour, who originally came from the same upriver region as he did:

They are not ordinary people, hunters. Like Pa Suarez: his father was a hunter and now he, too, is a hunter... When they watch an animal — maybe it is just something in the light, or the way that they move — but a hunter can know that it is a witch, turned himself into an animal. You know, very often, hunters know things that we don't know. They see things, when they are in the bush at night. But they do not easily talk about them.

Yet the very skills that Pa Lunsar so admired in his friend also imbue forest hunters with unpredictable — and dangerous — potential. Because they are able to enter spaces others fear, and to perceive forces that remain invisible to their neighbours, hunters are sometimes themselves suspected of shape-shifting to animal or spirit form when they enter the bush by dark (Leach 2000: 577; Włodarczyk 2006). 'A hunter is not', as Melissa Leach puts it, 'necessarily the sort of person one would want one's daughter to marry' (2000: 582).

People in Tissana rarely eat bush meat anymore, unless a friend happens to bring some from inland as a gift. Having grown up in this largely deforested coastal landscape, Tissana's younger residents were unimpressed by the supposed mystique of forest hunters. What dwindling patches of 'deep bush' remain in the vicinity of the town no longer appeared to them an obvious site of powerful or dangerous beings:

- Baki: The sea is fearsome, you know? There are a lot of different-different creatures under the water. Ah! A lot! If they were to come up on to the land, we'd all run away! Because there are a lot. And they are fearful!
- Me: Isn't the bush dangerous, too, in its own way?
- Baki: Well... no, the bush is not so bad, really. No, the bush is not bad like the sea... Hunters are not that special really. Hunting is not so hard.

Nonetheless, it is worth holding the image of the traditional Mandé hunter in our minds for a moment longer.³⁸ For the powerfully *ambiguous* potentialities embodied in his persona are very similar to the qualities Tissana's residents attribute to the people they call 'witches'.

Let me begin with the least controversial example, by returning to the fishermen where I left them a few pages ago: at sea, using every means available to them, competing against the men in their rival boats to locate fish in the water. Here, as in forested hunting grounds inland, experienced fishermen learn to read a combination of visible, but often extremely subtle, clues across the seascape. An acute observer will notice a flicker of motion just beneath the water's fluid surface, or will instinctively sense that the men in another boat are moving just a little bit too deliberately. However, in keeping with Sierra Leonean images of 'hunting' more generally, the very *most* masterful fishermen are credited with possessing an innate *embodied* advantage over their competitors.

Some of the largest commercial fishing boats in the Yawri Bay employ one crew member known as the 'phone-man': so-called because he is able to hear the fish, beneath the water, in a way other fishermen cannot. When the boat arrives in the fishing ground, the phone-man enters the sea:

You know how we people, we have our different-different languages? Well, so it is with fish — if you go in the water, if you know how to listen, you can hear them when they talk to each other. Every different fish has his own language. They listen to where they are... and they follow them — small-small, small-small.

³⁸ As other ethnographers have demonstrated, the skills of the hunters also prove valuable in urban settings (Archambault 2013; Hansen and Verkaarik 2009).

And when they get to where [the fish] are, they wave and tell the boat to come and cast its chain...

You have to be able to swim to be a phone-man.³⁹ I know a bit — they showed me a bit. But I can't do it like they do. I can hear [the fish], but I can't tell the difference between the big ones and the small ones. (Usifu, crewman)

These exceptionally skilled crewmen are paid many times more than anyone else in their boat — and not without good reason. If there was one thing everyone agreed on, it was that boats with a phone-man on-board consistently bring home noticeably larger catches than their rivals. Where there remains some room for disagreement, however, is on the ontological status of the phone-men themselves. Whereas Usifu emphasised the high level of practical experience required to accurately decipher the underwater soundscape, most people explained these abilities as one expression of an innate, *physical* state of superhuman sensory awareness: a state that is most simply summarised in Tissana as being a 'witch' or possessing 'witch eyes'. 'Phone-men... have those "witch eyes". They can "see". They go into the water, they hear the fishes when they talk — they can talk to them, they call them all into one place' (Moses, fisherman).

This slide, between 'listening' for the fish and directly communicating with them, was one that almost all my informants made. Both the Krio and the Sherbro language use a single word to denote both sensory 'hearing', and linguistic 'understanding' (*yehri* and *thee*, respectively). So, although I never heard anyone describing a phone-man literally shape-shifting into a non-human form — as both hunters and 'witches' are described doing in forest contexts (Ferme 2001; Leach 2000) — they are certainly assumed to take on qualities that blur the boundary between fishermen and their prey:

When they're casting the net, their 'witch' goes under the water. He can be under water for a long time — maybe an hour. They gather the fish together under the water, while the boat is sitting there on the water, waiting. They know how to do that.

Me: Are they not afraid that people know they're a witch?

³⁹ Many working fishermen, and certainly those who migrated to the coast in adulthood, do not swim.

It's not so secret. No! You pay the person! People boast of it, in fact! They boast of it. And you can see, when the boats come back, the ones who have a witch get more fish. (Mammy Kaddy, elder)

3.2.1 *The 'Underside' of Tissana's Townscape*

What is surprising, for anyone familiar with Africanist literature on 'occult economies', is that when people in Tissana discuss these witch-fishermen, they do not draw any direct correlation between their special abilities and their moral character. In town, too, what sets 'witches' apart from their neighbours is not their inherent 'evil', but rather the fact that they possess 'eyes' powerful enough to see, and so enable them to move beyond the surfaces of the manifest world, and into a shadowy spirit space 'not located in real dimensions or space or time' (Lamp 2008: 50):

They have their own world. We can call it the underworld. Like, how we are walking on this road now; they could be walking too but we wouldn't be able to see. They could be dancing right here in front of us and we wouldn't see them. (Mojo, tailor)

Returning to the argument I introduced at the beginning of this chapter: in principle, the 'diffuseness and ambiguity of discourses on the occult' (Ciekawy and Geschiere, 1998: 1) have long been recognised. In practice, however, whenever we privilege our own analytic models — which construct occult beliefs primarily as a vehicle for the expression of 'moral panic' about the global economic order — then we tend to slide automatically toward rather caricatured images of the witches themselves, as stylised symbols of 'evil in its most extreme forms' (La Fontaine 2011: 4). No doubt, in some ethnographic contexts,⁴⁰ this is an accurate reflection of local attitudes, but one of the difficulties of speaking about 'African witchcraft' as though it were in any way a coherent phenomenon is that, of course, the term itself was initially a colonial one, applied by European administrators and anthropologists across an entire continent to subsume a swathe of beliefs and practices that might, in fact, have had rather little in common. The more carefully one pays attention to the way that people in Tissana

⁴⁰ When fundamentalist Christians mobilise images of witches, for example, it does seem to be as a fairly caricatured icon of 'evil' (De Boeck 2004; Meyer 1995).

describe the ‘witches’ who inhabit their town and the spaces around it, the more evident it becomes that they are a much more morally complex set of characters than anthropology’s preoccupation with the ‘poetics of predation’ (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993: xxvi) typically allows space to acknowledge. Here, for example, Ami is describing Tissana’s thriving witch town:

- Ami: You see that big-big cotton tree? That tree is old. Our parents don't remember if their parents remember when it was planted. It's old. It's a big-big witch-shop. Yes! They have a big-big-big shop there, at that tree. A big witch shop.
- Me: What do they sell there?
- Ami: Everything! Like food, rice, clothes, pans; anything you could want. They even have knives; anything you want to buy. There are loads of tin-roofed houses, and they all have generators. It's a big place! A whole town! Only we don't see it...
- Me: If a person wants to buy something in that witch-shop, is it the same money that we use? The same leones?
- Ami: Yes, but in a witch. If you don't have those witch eyes, you can't go there.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Ami’s description of the world inhabited by Tissana’s witches is its surprising mundaneness. No mention here of the international travel or lavish wealth that Rosalind Shaw’s (2002) informants had described in their accounts of the witch world. Kagboro’s witches, it seems, have rather more local ambitions. Rather than an exotic global hub of occult forces, Tissana’s underworld is imagined as a disconcertingly local place: one that maps directly onto the surfaces of the manifest world. In fact, a surprisingly large subsection of Tissana’s population is assumed to have access to this realm; including most infants, twins and their siblings,⁴¹ sorcerers and anyone else who simply happens to have been born with eyes that enable them to see

⁴¹ A much larger proportion of people fall into this category than you might perhaps imagine. Even if measured by purely biomedical criteria, rates of twin births are several times higher in West Africa than elsewhere in the world (Peek 2011). Moreover, in Sierra Leone, as elsewhere in this region (*ibid*), births are sometimes considered ‘twin’ (*sabu*) even when only one child is born. In these cases, the unborn baby may be recognisable in the placenta.

beyond the surfaces of visible world. Here, for example, Ima and Dulai are discussing their own young children:

Ima: Asana can ‘see’ perfectly! He’s a twin. You know that? His companion died. One time, when Dulai and I had argued, I left Asana here and went to my father’s people in Plantain. He turned himself into a snake!

Dulai: Yes, it is true! I was asleep in my bed... And I saw Alusine, he was standing by my bed, and then he turned himself into a snake: a big one. Really! AH! Asana, Asana, he’s a ‘witch’! He’s powerful! But I love him. I want him to go to school. Or, if not that, maybe he will be a footballer.

Ima: Baby Jenny now, in Africa, we say she’s a *gbeshe*... She is the third one [the child born after twins]. She is even more powerful than a twin. In their own world, the three of them live in a little house together. She is perfect. Even though she’s so small — she doesn’t talk it — but she sees *everything*. She knows *everything*. But we now; we don’t see. Except maybe if we go to school.

Although people with ordinary sight often describe glimpsing this world in their dreams, this sphere of Tissana’s social world remains, for most people most of the time, just beyond their vision. Yet, even as Yusef and Adamse draw connections between a series of characteristics that we might not usually assume to be related to ‘witchcraft’ — shape-shifting, intelligence and exceptional insight — the one thing striking in its absence was any particular concern that their children are, or were going to grow up to be, ‘wicked’. Indeed, my neighbours were quick to acknowledge that the exceptional insight that came with possessing ‘witch eyes’ could, potentially at least, be used in any manner of productive ways. People who had studied in high school sometimes told me that the correct English translation for the Krio word ‘witch’ was ‘scientist’, and that the foreigners who created high-technology gadgets, or who knew how to find resources such as diamonds and minerals in Sierra Leone’s ground, were empowered with the same innate *embodied* potential — to see far — which gave the Yawri Bay’s ‘phone-men’

an advantage over their competitors. ‘Your own witches’, Mama Yebu told me, ‘use their eyes for good’:

Some people buy ‘witch’, you know? Yes! There is a place called _____. There’s a man there who knows the leaf. Yes, some people... they want to be able to ‘see’; whether to become a sorcerer, or for fishing, or for business. They’ll go there, and pay for the leaves. They take that juice and they drop it in their eyes so that — *whrooom!* — they can see everything! [Miming, like a child opening his eyes for the first time, looking around in wonder]. (Pa Bimbola, elder and healer)

However, as I go on to explore in the following section, this is an economy in which, it is generally taken for granted, *all* people are driven by the necessity to seize whatever narrow sliver of opportunity they have, in order to make a profit: even if, as is often the case, these ‘opportunities’ might involve some level of trickery or deception. My fellow lodger, David, was expressing a widely held truism when he told me: ‘people in Tissana are not reliable... If you went from Patti to Tissana Point, it would be hard to find five reliable people’. Living and working in such an atmosphere of pervasive half-trust, the knowledge that some people are able to act in ways invisible to their neighbours, can become a source of considerable anxiety. As we will see now, hidden spaces — including both the seascape and the ‘underworld’ — are assumed, by the majority of people who are excluded from them, to be the site of all manner of illicit economic strategies.

6.3 Imagining the Ocean; Imagining the Underworld

It goes rather without saying that, for the many *kustoments* and *boss-men* anxiously anticipating the boats’ return on the wharf, it was a matter of intense concern to speculate what might be happening beyond their sight at sea. This interest is not a matter of simple curiosity. In theory at least, a large proportion of the men at work in the sea each day ‘owe’ their catch to a specific individual on the wharf.⁴² In an economy as tight as Tissana’s, people’s livelihoods are very often hanging in the balance, as they

⁴² In many cases, the boat they are fishing in belongs to a land-based owner and, on four or five days of the working week, their catch is supposed to go in full, directly to that boss (see Chapter 3). Just as frequently, fishermen borrow money from a fish-processor, on the agreement that they will pay her back piecemeal, in fish, selling to her exclusively, until such time as the debt is finally cleared (see Chapter 4).

gaze out to sea: depending on their customers both catching fish, and honouring their promises to bring those fish home.

What boat owners and *banda* women are painfully aware of, however, is that the moment they move out of sight it is almost impossible to know what fishermen are actually doing. By the end of my eighteen months in Tissana — much of which I spent sitting on the wharf with the *banda* women, peering out to sea, awaiting the reappearance of a particular familiar patchwork sail — I had developed a fairly strong sense of the world they imagined there, over the horizon; and of the slippery, strategic economic games they ‘knew’ the men to be playing on the open sea. I lost track of the number of times I was told by fishmongers or boat owners such as these two:

All the time, all the time, they are all the same. That was why I just decided to leave [the fish business] in the end. You know, one boat, I invested SO much money, so much money — new boat, new engine, new net. I never saw even 1000 leones from that boat? Nothing. Fishermen... I gave the boat to someone: someone who I thought I could trust, a cousin of mine. And he went out and found crewmen, and then they just enjoyed themselves! They are very, very untrustworthy people, fishermen. (George Thomas, politician and former boat owner)

Well of course, for me, right now, I don't trust my fishermen – I am heartbroken. Why? Because... those boys who fish in my boat — they don't do right by me. For the whole month, if I get any fish, I am lucky! ... Always [they tell me] ‘no catch!’; always ‘no catch!’ (Timbo, boat owner)

It is taken for granted, amongst those based on the land, that crewmen routinely exploit the invisibility of their fishing grounds at the expense of their customers and patrons on land, often selling their fish in secret in another wharf town along the coast; sometimes even colluding with another crew to transfer their catch into a different boat at sea. Many women described this world of hidden trickery with an air of weary authority that belied the fact that — speaking in the most literal sense — the ocean was the site of a social life they could only ever really ‘know’ imaginatively. When my friend Kumba asked to borrow money to buy a new canoe, claiming he would repay our household by giving Buema fish to dry and sell, Buema had been vociferous in her attempts to protect me from what appeared, to her, a blatant attempt to ‘grift’ me:

Don't give him! Don't do it, Jenny... This is where my mother bore me! I know fishermen! I know Kumba! He'll ask, and ask, and ask you for money. He'll take your money, till you can't pay your transport home, but he'll take your fish and sell them somewhere else. When he lands in Tissana, he'll say: 'look! Here's a [single] *plassas* fish for you!'

In a curious twist of etymology, the Krio word for 'lend' is *tross* — derived from the English word 'trust' — although, in practice, debt relationships in Tissana are far more often characterised by a palpable sense of suspicion. Yet, however dubious they might be that their *tross* will be repaid, the fact remains that working *banda* women have no option but to continue investing their meagre capital, building economic relationships with seagoing fishermen. We saw in Chapter 4 that, aside from marrying a fisherman, *tross'ing* him cash is one of the few routes by which to obtain a steady supply of fish.

There are echoes here of the fragile 'confidence' that Andrew Walsh (2004, 2009) describes shaping the economy of his Malagasy sapphire-mining field site. In a predicament that parallels that of Tissana's land-bound fisherfolk, local gem dealers have no choice but to base their livelihoods upon reciprocal relationships that they know to be dangerously brittle; dealing with international trading partners who subsequently vanish into a mysterious global sapphire market, the contours of which they know themselves to be ignorant of. Faced with a reality in which traders all too often took stones on credit, never to return, Walsh's informants, like mine, navigate through an economic landscape in which:

Speculation and suspicion go hand in hand — the former as the best stand-in for unavailable certainty, and the latter as a necessary buffer against assurances of certainty and transparency in an ambiguous context that appears to offer little foothold for openness, honesty, or trust. (Walsh 2004: 226; cf. West and Sanders 2003)

There is, as he notes, an inherent fragility 'in all systems of moral and economic exchange in which reciprocity and confidence play key roles' (Walsh 2009: 59). This fragility is especially marked, I would add, in contexts such as Walsh's field site and my own, where one group of economic actors is far more mobile, and so by its nature far less amenable to be held accountable, than the other. It is in this respect that, for the

majority of people who cannot access them, the ocean and the ‘underworld’ share a surprisingly similar dynamic. For, although I have been at pains to stress that people with ‘witch eyes’ are not always necessarily ‘bad’ by nature, people in Tissana are all too conscious that witches, like seagoing fishermen, have ample opportunity to exploit their unseeing neighbours.

Indeed, at their most extreme, my field notes are peppered with descriptions of Tissana’s witches, the violence of which would have been quite startling were it not for the fact that similarly brutal ‘occult economies’ are well-documented in ethnographic accounts across contemporary Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 1998; Geschiere *et al.* 2007; Sanders 2003, 2008). It is widely taken for granted, for example, that the most wicked individuals in the underworld — like the most wicked individuals in this one — take part in secretive cannibalistic murders. On a day-to-day basis, however, the concerns that people most consistently express about witches tend to operate on a far more mundane economic level.

Although ordinary ‘two-eyed’ people often described catching a fleeting glimpse of the underworld in their dreams, this sphere of Tissana’s social world remains, for the most part, just past the edges of their vision. Yet it is no less immediately felt as a consequence of its invisibility. It is precisely this proximity to their everyday material experience that lent Tissana’s underworld such a powerful salience in the minds of my neighbours. For people in Tissana are all too conscious that witches’ heightened potential for mobility empowers them, just as it empowers seagoing fishermen, with ample opportunity to ‘grift’ their unseeing neighbours. As the following conversation with Jacob reveals, the knowledge that their social world is so heavily populated with unseen agencies only exacerbates the common experience, shared by many in Tissana, that they have frustratingly little control over their own material livelihoods:

‘This is another thing. A lot of people are complaining about it: this money business. You white people – you do not know what witchcraft is, do you? But you have seen it, in those Nigerian films? Well, it’s real! It’s a real thing. It is just so common here.

And, if you have money, you see it, you can touch it and count it, but it does not come to anything. And you can think and think and think and you do not know

where all that money has gone. It leaves you just like a breeze. Just like a breeze in your hands. If someone sees you counting money, they will grow envious of you, and they put witch on you; and the money, it just goes! Nothing good will ever come of it...

He took a break from this monologue and looked at me: 'I hope you understand what I am saying?' For a moment, I felt that I caught glimpse of something in his face — a desperation, which I had rarely seen before; the 'madness' that he is fighting. He had had two hours' sleep that night, he told me; 'thinking, thinking, worrying, worrying'. Fighting back tears of fatigue and frustration, he continued, wearily:

'And this is what I'm saying; with the money, you see? It is like a nightmare. Do you know what a nightmare is? That is how they do it. And one minute you have the money — it is there in your hand. But no matter how careful you are, it just vanishes. Like a breeze.'

There is nothing exceptional about Jacob's conviction that the 'structural violence' of his poverty must be underpinned by some more wilful, embodied violence, actively inflicted upon him by one or other of the people closest to him. Similar rumours circulate widely through everyday conversation in Tissana, where people very often make sense of their own impoverishment through the logic that one or other of their neighbours must have stolen from them, invisibly, 'in a witch way'; covertly robbing their money and good fortune. Many share Jacob's suspicion — that, when the money they worked so hard to earn 'turns to breeze' with depressing predictability, it can only be that they must have been robbed imperceptibly by their 'witch-eyed' neighbours:

Sometimes, it will happen, they know how to steal from you, in a way that you cannot see. So the person has to pay you 100,000 leones, and, as they are standing there, you count the money and it is all there. But when you go home and look again, it is only 80,000! They have stolen it in a witch way! (Pa Lunsar, elder)

If you're trying to do business with someone who has 'witch eyes', you'll never see any benefit. They will always take your money. You won't know how,

because you can't see them do it. But they do it — in a witch-way. (Miriam, *banda* woman)

In fact, this nagging sense — of suspecting that one must have been robbed, and yet having no tangible evidence of any wrongdoing having taken place — is not limited only to people's experience of doing business with 'witches'. It is a frustratingly familiar quality of economic life on the Kagboro Coast. In an economy as tight as Tissana's, relationships between crewmen, boat owners and *banda* women often come under considerable strain. Individuals, weary of struggling to balance their livelihoods in a context of such unrelenting material shortage, often make sense of their own poverty by channelling their frustrations into the micro-struggles of their closest economic relationships (cf. Booth *et al.* 1999: 23; Whitehead 1990; Schoepf and Schoepf 1988). But the peculiar predicament faced by land-based fisherfolk is that they can rarely *really* know with absolute certainty whether they have, as they are apt to suspect, been 'grifted'.

As we have seen, fishing is an innately unpredictable business — and it has become more so in recent decades, as an ever-increasing number of fishing boats compete to catch an ever-declining population of fish. It is quite possible that, on the many occasions Timbo's crew returned home empty-handed, they were being completely honest: they had simply failed to catch anything. This is not, however, the explanation favoured by Timbo, George or any of the other countless boat owners and *banda* women who are nowadays all too accustomed to being disappointed on the wharf.

6.4 'If You Want to Go and Thieve in Secret, That's Fine!'

That said, more powerful boat owners are able to take some measures to try to keep a track of their crew, even after they have moved out of sight into the sea. Here, one of Plantain Island's wealthiest *boss-men* is describing the strategies he has put in place to uncover the occasions when his crew attempt to 'play games', by secretly selling their catch in another town:

Moses: And you must have somebody special in that boat who gives you information. If there is a good catch and there is any game-playing, then you have to know I have somebody in the boat. He sends messages to me, of what is happening. But they [his crewmates] don't know about him.

Me: Oh, so it's not the captain?

Moses: It is not! Maybe it is just somebody who they [the other crew] don't even seem to recognise in the boat. It can be my personal friend. But they don't know that. [Laughs]

Me: Ah, I can see that's important. I've heard stories of crewmen going and selling their fish in secret...?

Moses: Yes! Of course they do that! When there's a catch... they find another port. They go there, they sell, share that money, buy fuel and then they come back at night with no catch. You, the boat owner will never see that — unless you have somebody honest who is your eye, always ready to report them – secretly! Then I will say, 'you went to this fishing village there – I have a friend there – where is the money now?'. Then the others will start to say, 'I was not party to that-o!'. Then they begin to expose themselves. [Laughs] It is very entertaining.

When I asked Jacob how a spy of this kind would be viewed by his crewmates, if he were ever discovered, his answer had been unequivocal:

If [his crewmates] knew who he was, they would hate him. They would hate him, and take him to be an enemy, because that person is blocking their survival. If he is not careful maybe they would even hurt him in the sea. They might even just leave him in the sea. Yes, that can happen sometimes.

The difference between the two men's tone is striking. Jacob, for his part, is recognising the stark material reality of crewmen's lives, in which, for four or five days of the working week, they have no 'legitimate' claim on the fish they work so hard to catch. In a boat as large as Moses's, the remaining days' catch, which does officially belong to the crew, must be divided between as many as twenty men; each with his own family and responsibilities on land. It is hardly surprising, then, that crewmen are so often prepared to risk being caught 'cheating' with their boss's boat at sea. Employed under such

conditions, the work of deceiving one's *boss-man* seems less a matter of game-playing than one of survival.

However, what is interesting in Moses's testimony is that, even whilst seeking to demonstrate that he was savvy enough to outwit his crew, he actually reveals a fairly high degree of acceptance of their low-level 'thieving', which he dismissed, laughingly, as 'very entertaining'. This attitude of partial tolerance is made much more explicit in this interview with another boat owner, Kain:

Even now, right now, I have a problem with my crewmen... Sometimes they steal from me. When they catch [a lot of fish], they just go and sell them somewhere else... It hurts me, because they should not do that but it's something you just have to bear. With a paddle boat, like mine, if you lose your fishermen, it's a problem! With a mechanised boat, you will not have this problem. Even if your crew leave you, other men will come. But for me now, if my crew leave me, my boat will be sitting on the wharf. This is why it's important to treat your crew well. If you encourage them, they will not leave.

If Kain recognised that his crew were so poor that 'encouraging' them entailed accepting a certain amount of 'thieving', the question remains why he did not simply pay them a little better to begin with. It is worth noting that, working in a quite different Sierra Leonean context, Melissa Leach encountered a similar pattern of everyday 'stealing'. In her fieldwork in the Gola Forest, she found that a certain level of 'thieving' within households was taken for granted as a normal element of domestic life, and a necessary strategy for women whose husbands rarely gave them enough money to meet their financial obligations. Men 'claim to tolerate "theft" as it is more convenient than facing wives' incessant demands for money' (1994: 199).

In fact, similar 'cat and mouse games' have been described between boat owners and their crewmen by ethnographers working in fishing grounds elsewhere (Beuving 2010: 240), suggesting that these illicit strategies (and the fields of suspicion that mirror and possibly magnify them) have as much to do with the unique patterns of movement and concealment facilitated by the seascape as they do with any specific 'cultural' disposition. Nonetheless, I follow Rebecca Prentice here in suggesting that the moral *salience* of economic behaviours can only really be understood when viewed within the

‘wider cultural contours of...daily life’ (2009: 137), and that this is especially true in cases, such as this, where people’s livelihoods depend upon strategies that challenge our — and sometimes also our informants’ — taken-for-granted sense of where the boundary between licit and illicit behaviour lies.

Working in a garment factory in Trinidad, Prentice had encountered a somewhat parallel situation, in which certain specific forms of ‘thieving’ were viewed by her informants as morally legitimate. Although the same women would have condemned ‘stealing’ under almost any other circumstance, Prentice sets out to understand why it was that ‘thieving a chance’ on the factory floor could instead be celebrated as an expression of ‘self-reliance, autonomy, and cunning individualism’ (Prentice 2009: 124).

In this region of West Africa, it is impossible to have a meaningful discussion of ways in which people evaluate the morality of trust and deception, without pausing to contemplate the wider cultural content in which people work to infuse every level of social discourse with an atmosphere of ‘secrecy’ (see Chapter 1). To outside observers, this dynamic of concealment has seemed to find its most vivid expression in the gendered ‘secret societies’ that play such an important role in customary political life. Until their role was gradually encroached upon by Western styles of schooling, two parallel ‘secret’ societies — the men’s Poro and the women’s Bundu — had been the main educational institutions in the region. All young women had spent a period of several months in their society’s bush, whilst young men had, at one time, remained in the Poro bush for as long as three years, passing through a series of ritual transformations and being taught the various skills deemed necessary for adult life (d’Azevedo 1962b; Little 1966; Maccormack 1977a; Murphy 1980, 1998).

Although it is true that the Poro society’s direct political power has atrophied fairly dramatically in recent decades on the Kagboro coast, this does nothing to erase the centuries-long heritage in which initiation societies had played a central role in shaping the character of social life in this region; not least by training successive generations of young men and women what it meant to be a responsible adult member of Sherbro society. As part of this process, young people were inducted into the lowest echelons of the sodality’s esoteric knowledge, but they also received training in a whole range of skills that we might recognise as more self-evidently ‘pragmatic’. Here, Pa Lunsar is

listing some of the skills he was taught during his own initiation as a young man in the 1950s:

Formerly, you used to be inside the bush for three years. In those three years, the *so'eh* [the Poro elder] would teach you — how to marry, how to farm, what kind of person to be when you grow up. In those days, they'd teach you to be responsible. In that bush, they'd teach you how to be a hunter, how to be a fisherman. You will be taught how to spy. (Pa Lunsar, Sherbro elder)

It speaks vividly to Ferme's description of Sierra Leonean social life as shaped by a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' (2001: 7) that, when Pa Lunsar listed the basic livelihood skills required by a Sherbro boy, contemplating his transition to manhood, he should include 'spying' so intuitively on the list. Here he goes on to describe the day-to-day life of a Poro initiate in the 1950s:

You go to learn. You go to learn. You have to learn hardship! So your family do not bring food for you. [The initiates] go all around the area in search of food, at night. But you have to be very, very careful, so that no one sees you. You go in the night in search of your food.

Just as had been the case for young men in the past, young female initiates continue to be actively encouraged by their *so'eh*'s [Bundu elders] to learn self-sufficiency by thieving from their neighbours' farms by cover of night. Here, Buema is reminiscing about her own time as an initiate, some fifteen years ago:

Buema: When I joined Bundu it was during the war and we were hard up! We wanted to cook, but we didn't have any *plassas*, so the *so'eh*'s showed us how to thief, and told us to go out into the bush at night. Ah! We took a lot of food! When people came to their farms in the morning, they cried! [laughing].

Me: Couldn't they do anything?

Buema: AH! No! Those are the rules! We were in the bush for three months — we thieved from every farm, all around here! Even just now, when you were in London, those Bundu girls came into Jacob's garden at night. They thieved his cassava, his potatoes, his pepper — everything! I laughed so much! Jacob was so angry! But then he laughed, too. There's nothing to do except laugh.

Later that day I asked Jacob for his account of the same event:

- Jacob: Yes, the Bundu women stole pepper from my garden. A lot of pepper!
- Me: How did you know it was them?
- Jacob: They said it! Everyone knew it was them. The women themselves told me, too.
- Me: Were you angry?
- Jacob: Well, I mean, yes. I was angry. But only inside myself, only inside this compound. I would never lodge a complaint to the women, because it's their right. They are a society. Those are the rules.

Although they must leave the seclusion of the Bundu bush itself in order to raid the gardens of their neighbours around Tissana, the young women remain protected from male eyes by the powerful — and, for non-initiates, dangerous — medicines that cover their skin. 'Even if we went into the farms in the afternoon, no man can see us. We sing, so they can hear us coming. Then the men run and hide! Those who don't run, they get sick' (Aminata, petty trader). In this sense, Poro and Bundu initiation fit very neatly within classic anthropological models of 'rites of passage', in which the 'relatively fixed and stable states' (Turner 1967: 83) of childhood and adulthood are separated by a liminal period during which young people are suspended in ambiguous limbo outside the ordinary stream of social life.

However, what is striking in both Buema and Pa Lunsar's accounts, is that learning to perform clever acts of trickery is not so much presented as evidence of the moral order turned upside-down, but rather as an important training in the resourcefulness young people will need if they are to succeed in their adult lives. As Pa Lunsar put it, 'When you come out of the bush [after initiation], nothing will be difficult for you. You will not be lazy again.'

It is in keeping with this broader pattern, in which a certain level of strategic deceit is accepted as a necessary livelihood skill, that there is an extremely strong moral discourse against loose talk. Writing of a related language group in neighbouring Liberia, Bellman described how averse her Kpelle neighbours were to open discussions of village social life. Even in cases where everybody present knew the full 'facts' of the case, they

would invariably discuss them only obliquely, through the careful allusions and metaphors of ‘deep talk’. The result was a field of varying, ambiguous and often conflicting interpretations of the world (Bellman 1984). Here we see clear echoes of Mariane Ferme’s claim that, in the small Mende village where she conducted her fieldwork in the 1980s, ‘a person who communicates directly what she or he desires or thinks... is considered an idiot or no better than a child’ (2001: 6).

Imagine the possibilities, then, in a town like Tissana where — quite aside from the cacophony of dialects spoken by traders and immigrants from other parts of the country — no fewer than five languages are commonly spoken on the streets: Krio, Temne, Sherbro, Mende and Fula. Having deliberately shifted into a ‘deep’ Sherbro, well beyond my comprehension, my friends would occasionally tease me: ‘We’re hiding from you!’ (*Hi kong ha math!*). Yet it is not only ethnographers for whom Tissana’s language-scape is riddled with blind corners. Since it would be unusual for an individual to speak more than two or three languages with any degree of fluency, the result is a patchy, multilayered, polyglot fabric, one that, you will not be surprised to hear, speakers learn to manoeuvre with considerable strategy and skill — controlling which of their conversations are heard, and which remain private.

I witnessed this daily on the veranda of my own home, which happened to straddle one of the busiest pedestrian thoroughfares through town. A near-constant stream of people passed across that veranda each day, often pausing to sit for a few moments to rest, to shelter from the weather, and to gossip. As the topic of conversation meandered, the language on the veranda would switch fluidly from Krio to Temne to Sherbro to Mende, and back again. Sometimes, these switches were absent-minded; but just as often, there was a strategic element of deliberate ‘hiding’ taking place. With each readjustment, new boundaries were being drawn between those people present who were invited to join in, and those who were being explicitly excluded from the conversation:

Although sometimes, if you have not been around with someone for a long time, you will have to be careful; because some people will pretend that they do not hear the language, but they do hear. Especially with this intermarriage. This is why it is harder now to hide. (Mama Yebu, elder)

Perhaps the most commonly expressed complaint I heard people making against the moral character of their neighbours was that, whether as individuals or as a population as a whole, they were dangerously inclined to loose talk. The Krio word *kongosar* can be translated into English as ‘gossip’ or ‘snitch’, and it is similarly loaded with connotations of selfishness, slipperiness and betrayal. Here, three of my most trusted informants employ a powerful set of similes to illustrate the destructive potential of unveiling other people’s hidden actions:

To be nice to a person’s face, then wait until they go over there to talk badly of them — we say it is the same thing as if, when your friend dies, you wait three days, then come and chop up their body and eat them... But it is a very, very big problem here. It is just too common. (Kumba, fisherman)

The violence of the language Kumba chooses here to describe a simple act of speech is arresting. Throughout West Africa, analogies relating to cannibalism are typically reserved to describe only the most extreme forms of wilfully antisocial behaviour (Bayart 1993 [1989]; Pratten 2007). However, both Buema and Pa Lunsar go further: emphasising the real-world danger that is unleashed whenever a person speaks something that ought to have remained silent:

A *kongosar* is worse than a thief... *Kongosar* heaves confusion. It scatters families... It ends marriages. *Kongosar* kills people. (Buema, petty trader)

You know about the witchcraft we have here, and you know what it can do. It is very, very bad. But when you look at it, *kongosar* is heavier than witchcraft... It can even lead to murder. (Pa Lunsar, elder)

What initially surprised me about the passion with which my informants denounced *kongosars* was that they did not reserve their criticism for instances when they suspected the gossip to be false. On the contrary, as Jacob is explaining to me here, *kongosars* are to be feared the most when they reveal a genuine hidden truth:

Jacob: *Kongosars* are telling the truth about the person, but that person did something hidden and you go and tell the person who they stole from, or whatever. It is a very bad thing!

Me: But isn't it the person who stole who is bad?

Jacob: Well, yyyyes... Yes, to steal is bad. But the person who is stolen from does not know who did it! He might grow annoyed, annoyed, annoyed but, in the end, he will just leave his case to God. But if you go and tell him who did it, he might just explode with anger! And whose fault is that? It is the *kongosar's* fault, isn't it? Because the person [the thief] went and did his business in secret, but you who knows and tells the [victim], you are the bad person now.

So, on one hand, unseen behaviour itself carries clear implications of criminality and is often assumed to relate to illicitly obtained wealth. Yet, as much as people worry that their neighbours and business partners are covertly defrauding them, it is the cause of almost as much anxiety that *kongosars* are relentlessly undermining the secrecy that others worked so hard to construct and maintain.

This apparently contradictory moral stance was rendered particularly stark for me when I heard the following speech, delivered in a political rally in Tissana. The speaker, who was representing Sierra Leone's governing party, is the same former boat owner whom we heard, a few pages ago, despairing that the fishermen he once employed had been 'very, very untrustworthy people'. Faced with a crowd of fisherfolk to impress, his tone was altogether different:

The government has made a promise to ban some [environmentally unsustainable] fishing methods, like channel fishing. And we will stick by that promise! But what you do, if you want to go and thief in secret, that is fine! What you do when you are out at sea is left to you. But it is those *kongosar*-people [snitches] who are the problem here! It is them that you have to be careful of. (George Thomas, politician)

Conclusion

It has repeatedly been argued that, in essentially 'egalitarian' economies, nightmarish tales of linking inequality and economic impoverishment to more active, embodied forms of hidden violence can be read as an embedded critique of 'greedy' individualism: the implication often being that people find individualism so frightening because it is an intrusive and distinctively 'capitalist' vice (Richards 1996; Gable 1997). Here, Jean La

Fontaine expresses, with refreshing frankness, an assumption that runs quietly underneath almost every contemporary discussion of witchcraft, and which helps to explain the runaway success of witchcraft-as-moral-critique analyses:

The concept of witchcraft concern[s] activities and persons who do not, as far as we know, exist. While real people may be accused, the evidence supporting the accusations is not rationally founded or supported by hard evidence. So we are talking about ideas, not behaviour. (2011: 14)

Most ethnographers are far more coy in skirting around this slightly uncomfortable fact: that, when our informants start talking about witches, we tend not really to believe them. By discussing people's anxieties about witchcraft as though they were a series of meta-reflections on the shifting economic order, ethnographers have found an avenue by which to listen to, and engage seriously with, our informants' stories — without getting tangled up with prickly issues of veracity. One point I have tried to illustrate in this chapter is that, if we begin with the assumption that people's anxieties about the occult are best engaged with not so much as an element of their lived world, but rather as a moralising meta-narrative *about* that world, then we risk missing the ontological specificity of what our informants are actually telling us.

Writing almost thirty years ago, Suzette Heald raised the interesting point that — although many African societies have historically bracketed thieving together with witchcraft as similar kinds of behaviours deserving of similar kinds of punishment — this correlation is almost never acknowledged in the literature. According to Western conceptions of the material world, the former is a 'real' economic crime, whilst the latter belongs in the sphere of 'mystical...or arcane beliefs and practices' (Heald: 86; cf. Niehaus 2012). However, if lack of 'hard evidence' is, as La Fontaine suggests, reason enough to assume that occult economies belong in the realm of 'ideas, not behaviours' (2011: 14), we would have to extend a similar logic to dismiss a huge amount else that people in Tissana know about their material and economic world. The 'witch-eyed' people who inhabit the hidden spaces around the town's landscape are remarkable not for their inherently 'evil' character, but rather for their ability to see, and so to move and act, in spaces their neighbours cannot see. In this respect — for the majority of people who are excluded from them — the ocean and the underworld share a surprisingly

similar dynamic. Both spaces are fundamentally integrated within Tissana's everyday material economy, yet are located just past the edges of the publicly visible townscape.

There are resonances here with Simmel's classic attempt to generalise the experience of inhabiting a world permeated with secrecy. 'The secret offers, so to speak, the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world; and the latter is decisively influenced by the former' (1967 [1950]: 330). In Tissana, as Simmel had predicted, individuals' knowledge that their neighbours have access to hidden spaces fosters a sense of their material environment as 'enlarged', stretching far beyond the limits of their own sensory experience. In an economy as stretched as Tissana's, most people experience their ignorance of these hidden spaces as a source of palpable anxiety.

However, it would be simplistic to read individuals' justified *anxiety* — at having to negotiate their livelihoods through so slippery a social sphere — as evidence that they are condemning their neighbours' *morality* in any straightforward way. People in Tissana find themselves navigating through an economic landscape in which they know it to be as true of their neighbours as it is of themselves that the best chance of scraping a reasonable living is to risk tricking their rivals at sea, and their *boss-man* and business partners on land. Similar patterns of secrecy and misinformation are common characteristics of fishing livelihoods the world over (Palmer 1990). Faced with a reality in which, as Jacob once put it to me, 'whenever a person is poor, you know he is tricky', people make sense of these relationships in part through a long-standing aesthetic, which values concealment as an art as much as it fears it as an act of deception.

Chapter 7: Material Words

In this final ethnographic chapter, I return to the problem introduced at the beginning of the thesis, as we watched Tito giving away half a million leones' worth of fish in return for the spoken blessings of 'the mummies, the friends, the brothers: *[of] all those people who just came and begged, no more*' (my emphasis). On days when they are successful at sea, it is common for fishermen to distribute a large proportion of their precious catch amongst the crowds of people who gathered to meet them on the shore. As we have seen, men give gifts of fish to their lovers, relatives, customers and friends: but also to strangers with whom they have no existing relationship at all. One thread that has run throughout this thesis has been to explore the various ways in which people use material gifts as a means of strategically forging and strengthening useful social bonds. However, in fishermen's own accounts, they invariably emphasised that their reason for *wapping* (gifting fish) was *not* to nurture social ties with the specific individual they gave to, nor even to promote a positive reputation for themselves within the community as a whole. Rather, they would insist, the most powerful motivation beyond almost any material gift is to accumulate 'blessings'.

In this chapter I will argue that blessings are — as fishermen claim — a powerful mobilising force in Tissana's political economy. Notwithstanding its etymological root in Christian-English, the term 'blessing' has been adopted in the Sierra Leonean context to signify a concept for which there is no direct analogue in Anglo-American English. Whilst they appeal for their ultimate effectiveness to God or Allah, blessings actually emerge in Tissana's social fabric at a far more grounded level, in the concrete everyday interactions between two individuals. For there is only one way to accumulate them, and that is to be actively 'given' them by another person uttering the words aloud: 'May God bless'. The people I knew in Tissana were consistent and absolutely explicit that these simple spoken words carry a weight far beyond 'mere' expressions of gratitude or goodwill. As Pa Lunsar once put it: 'You can give that person any other thing, but the best thing you can give them is a blessing. That blessing is like a ray behind them through their life.'

As this quote begins to suggest, people discuss blessings, and circulate them, as a latently material element of the economy. Not only are blessings generally (indeed, in

my experience in Tissana, *only*) offered in response to material gifts of fish or money. The benefit of receiving a blessing is described in equally narrow, and equally material, terms. Never described as bringing spiritual salvation or any similarly intangible measure of well-being, I only ever heard blessings referred to as desirable for their ability to bring material, this-worldly success. More effusive beneficiaries of fish on the wharf make this very explicit in the wording of their blessings to fishermen: ‘May Allah give you twice that which you have given me’, ‘May the Lord give you plenty-plenty money’, and so on.

As we will see below, there are some broad continuities between the ways in which my informants imbued spoken blessings with material power, and the ways in which people elsewhere in Sierra Leone and West Africa also do so. However, I want to begin by emphasising what is *peculiar*, and therefore intriguing, about Tissana’s wharf side blessing economy. In her fieldwork in southern Sierra Leone in the 1980s, Caroline Bledsoe (1992), had also been struck by the considerable energy her informants invested, seeking to accumulate blessings. In common with my neighbours in Tissana, Bledsoe’s informants had expressed a strong faith in the concrete material force of these words, to ‘make [a person] prosper... the major support or lever that will lift someone to better himself’ (1992: 182). Her neighbours explained, just as mine had done, that there is no way to accumulate this vital resource *except* through interpersonal relationships: they were gifted from one individual to another, and always in return for offerings of a more tangible kind. Here, however, the ethnographic continuities end. For, in the rural economy described by Bledsoe, blessings were only ever transferred along certain, narrowly defined chains of hierarchical relations: from ancestors, to high-ranking living patrons, to their dependants, as a reward for long periods of loyal subordination.

The rapid, opportunistic circulation of fish and blessings across Tissana’s wharf seems almost anarchic by comparison. Without functioning to naturalise existing patterns of social authority, we might wonder why it continues to make sense to people in Tissana that these spoken words are valuable — as things in themselves. Where does this value come from, and what are its consequences on individuals’ everyday economic survival?

This discussion fits within a long tradition in West African regional ethnography, in which many researchers have often recognised that their informants draw no sharp categorical

distinction between material and immaterial elements of their environment (e.g. Jędrej 1976; MacGaffey 1988; Murphy 1998; Tonkin 2000; Ferme 2001). My contribution here is to interrogate *how* these seemingly esoteric questions of ‘im/materiality’ obtain relevancy in people’s lives through their everyday livelihood practices: through the work they invest in economic exchange. In this respect, my project could be read as the mirror of Ferme’s. Her famous analysis of the ‘underneath of things’ is concerned with ‘the *material bearers of meaning* inscribed onto the rural Sierra Leonean landscape’ (2001: 14, my emphasis):

Despite the fact that anthropologists have begun to pay attention again to questions of secrecy, their focus is still primarily on discursive domains, on historical memory, and generally at the level of consciousness. Instead, my focus here moves beyond the paradigm of consciousness toward an analysis of the material bearers of collective memory and an examination of those contested meanings. (Ferme 2001: 9)

By contrast, my own interest is to explore the practical consequences that arise from the fact that spoken words are often imbued with a weight and a value that has little to do with ‘meaning’.

This chapter explores the shape, genealogy and function of words as ‘things’ across three sections. I begin in **Section 7.1** by describing the unusual characteristics of orality in Tissana where, despite basic levels of literacy, spoken words are credited with carrying as much weight as their written form. In a town in which almost every person is tied into a complex network of small and large debts, spoken pledges circulate through Tissana’s economy in such large volumes that they could meaningfully be described as the town’s second currency. **Section 7.2** is concerned specifically with the exchange of spoken blessings. Following a general discussion of ‘prayer economies’ (Last 1988) elsewhere in the ethnographic literature, I trace the genealogy of Tissana’s unusually fluid, unstructured trade in blessings. Changes in coastal society over recent decades mean that contemporary fisherfolk have rather little interest in working to maintain relationships with the ancestral spirits who, elsewhere in Sierra Leone, are credited with ‘underwriting’ the value of blessings passed between a patron and their dependant (Bledsoe 1990). I seek to understand how — despite such radical shifts in the social context within which they are offered and received — the words themselves continue to be credited with carrying substantial value. **Section 7.3** discusses how speech is woven through the very fabric of material culture in Sierra Leone. With a particular focus

on ‘swear medicines’, the section reveals that spoken language is often credited with a material force of its own, in ways that might have rather little to do with communicating a message. This quality of materiality enabled spoken blessings to retain a sense of weight and value, even through periods of dramatic socio-economic change: with powerful consequences for the livelihood decisions of fishermen, and for the survival of those people who gather to meet them each day on the wharf.

7.1 An Oral Economy

To develop this argument, I begin, in this first part, by looking at the most routine ways in which people in Tissana strategically circulate spoken words in their everyday lives. As we have already begun to see in previous chapters (see especially Chapter 4), in such a cash-stretched environment it is all but impossible to function as an economically active person without becoming enmeshed in a complex, ever-fluctuating web of petty-loans and debts. Yet, despite the fact that most people in Tissana are able to read and write, none of this elaborate web of credit and debt is ever recorded in written form.

Such a complete disinterest in creating written contracts indicates a faith in the binding force of spoken language that academics had once assumed characteristic only of preliterate societies. Writing over thirty years ago, Malian anthropologist Hampâté Bâ (1981) had set out to capture the essence of an African ‘oral tradition’ that was, as he saw it, on the brink of being eclipsed by invasive colonial forms of literate knowledge. To this extent, he had echoed the work of contemporary proponents of the ‘literacy thesis’: scholars such as Walter Ong (1991), Eric Havelock (1982) and Jack Goody (1977), all of whom had agreed that writing, ‘more than any other single invention’ (Ong 1991: 78), transforms human consciousness and patterns of thought.

However, whereas Ong and his colleagues had viewed this transformation through the triumphalist framework of modernist intellectual progress — one that culminated, for the literate, in a ‘realisation of fuller, interior, human potentials’ (Ong 1991: 82; cf. Collins 1995) — Bâ’s attention had been focused in exactly the opposite direction. It is with the nostalgic tone of one who imagines his cherished subject vanishing rapidly from view that Bâ paints a rather idealised image of an African ‘oral society’ that literacy had yet to infiltrate.

His argument is partly materialist in nature. In the absence of any technology to capture words and ossify them as text — where the only words are words spoken — then, he argued, people must, by definition, have a fundamentally different relationship to speech. Without written signatures or documents, there is no frame of reference by which spoken words are made to appear transient or insubstantial in comparison. Speech is enabled to carry a far greater social burden than we tend now to allow it in fully literate societies: ‘Man is bound by the word he utters. He is committed by it. He is his word and his word bears witness to what he is. The very cohesion of society depends on the value of and respect for the spoken word’ (Bâ 1981: 185). Despite their ideological differences, all these scholars had been united on one thing: wherever the technology for writing is introduced, it inexorably usurps the important functions that, in more ‘traditional’ societies, human voices had once been allowed to perform. ‘The deep sacred bond that used to unite man and word disappears’ (Bâ 1981: 167). Yet, such neatly predetermined teleologies long since fell out of fashion in anthropology (Ferguson 1999), and rightly so.

Lying on the coast, Sherbros were the first of Sierra Leone’s ‘native’ peoples⁴³ to come into sustained contact with Euro-Americans, and Shenge’s residents are proud of the knowledge that their town had been home to the first Western-style school outside Freetown. This visiting fish trader was echoing a widely held stereotype when she told me that: ‘Well, one thing those Sherbros do have, is intelligence. They’re clever-oh! They had books before any of the rest of us did’ (Finda, fish trader from Kono). Up to this day, education continues to be highly valorised in Tissana, and parents or foster parents often make considerable sacrifices in order to enable the young people in their households to attend school for as many years as possible.

Yet, the fact is, outside of the classroom, writing has almost no visible place in everyday material culture. It is a three-hour journey to the nearest place where one might, conceivably, buy a newspaper. There is no postal service. Pens and notebooks, although widely available, belong within a clearly delimited realm of material culture, and are associated exclusively with the activities of schoolchildren. Nobody I knew even used the text message function on their mobile phone. Whatever prestige may have been

⁴³ As opposed to the mixed, freed-slave/migrant population of Freetown.

attached to literacy, it did not seem to alter the fact that, in virtually every practical sense, Tissana has remained an oral society.

As one might imagine, this persistent orality has important repercussions for the way in which the local economy functions. For example, I once spent a day shadowing an experienced fish trader, Esta, as she collected her load of dry fish, ready to return to her market in Koidu. Upon her arrival, over a month previously, she had visited seventeen of her regular customers and decided how to *tross* [loan] her cash between them. Over the long intervening weeks, I had grown used to seeing Esta, gracefully killing time on one or other of her friends' verandas whilst, in the meantime, her *banda* women *kustoments* had been 'working' her money, often re-*tross*'ng it to their own fishermen-*kustoments* as a means of securing fish on the wharf; sometimes using the cash for other purposes, in the hope of earning it back before Esta came to collect her debts. Now, though, their time had run out.

As Esta marched cheerfully from one *banda* to the next, I was struck by the level of personal charm and mental dexterity required to do her job well. Even as my eyes adjusted to the half-light of another unfamiliar smokehouse, she would already be crouched on the earth floor beside her customer, scanning the baskets of dried fish piled around her, assessing how much each was worth, and judging whether they fitted the description of the orders she had made. Her affable demeanour belied the seriousness of these conversations, for there was a significant amount of money at stake. In total, she had brought over six million leones (around £1,100) with her to the coast, much of which had been entrusted to her by her fellow market traders in Koidu, to procure fish on their behalf. Neither Esta nor any of her customers had made any written record of their transactions. Yet, despite the amount of time that had passed, no chink showed in her confidence in the accuracy of her memory: she knew precisely what was owed her, and by whom.

It was the tail end of the rainy season and fishing had been slow. Not all her customers had managed to gather enough fish to fulfil the promises made all those weeks earlier. What was striking, though — when one considers how much time had passed and how desperately close to the edge of subsistence many of these *banda* women live — was that not one of Esta's customers made any attempt to fudge or deny the size of her debt. In each case, they simply negotiated a price for what fish they did have, and

begged Esta to carry the shortfall over until her next visit. The example is a mundane one: but it is multiplied myriad times across Tissana's economy. As we have seen, almost everyone — whether a boat owner, trader, crewman or *banda* woman — is similarly embedded in a personal network of customers and clients. Yet, despite the fact that most people in Tissana are able to read and write, none of this elaborate interlocking tangle of verbal contracts is ever committed to paper.

A similar pattern is replicated, too, on much smaller scales, and shorter cycles of time. With around ten thousand residents, Shenge-Tissana is a largish town by Sierra Leonean standards. Yet it has no physical marketplace. Rather, the town pulses with a constant circulation of petty traders. Traders hawking everything from doughnuts, to pharmaceuticals, to second-hand fashion, weave relentless cycles around Tissana's houses and *bandas*. The following excerpt from my field notes describes a familiar scene on the veranda of my own home, as one of these roving traders passed through our compound:

Hoisting her heavy rubber baff-pan to the ground, she rattled out her weary sales pitch: 'Pepper! I've got pepper-oh! One cup. One grand.⁴⁴ One week! Four cups. Three grand. One week!' I had never met this woman before, and nobody else in our compound greeted her with any familiarity either. Yet she proceeded, without hesitation, to measure out the different quantities of chilli requested by each of the various women on the veranda. And, without asking for payment, or making any written record of the debt, she continued on her route.

The 'one week' so integral to this trader's pricing plan referred to the amount of time she would allow her customers before returning to collect their debts. By the time she had managed to distribute her entire load of chilli peppers, in various-sized lots in households up and down the wharf, she would have (what seemed to me) an extraordinary amount of information to remember. Yet the vast majority of hawkers operate in this way. Many thousands of similar spoken pledges are made in Tissana each week — from a thousand leones (20p) for a cup of chilli peppers, up to five hundred thousand (£100) for a load of fish. And, regardless of whether these promises were exchanged between long-established *kustoments* or mere acquaintances, none was underscored by written records.

⁴⁴ One thousand leones.

This is certainly not to say that business always runs as smoothly as in Esta's case above. On the contrary, disputes are extremely common. My housemate Buema made and hawked soap for a living, so I witnessed up close the frustrations inherent in a livelihood based on petty-debt collection. More often than not, she returned home from yet another evening spent touring town attempting to locate the many small payments owed her, announcing: 'If you say 'one week' [then for] two weeks, three weeks, they hold your money! If they don't pay me my soap money, I'll make a sober-sober palaver! I'll cuss them in the street, bitter-bitter one! And you know I know how to make a palaver!' Yet, simply because verbal contracts are not always easily fulfilled, this does nothing to detract from Bâ's broader point: that where people do not rely on the technology of writing, 'the very cohesion of society depends on the value of and respect for the spoken word' (1981: 167). The enormous volume of verbal pledges that circulate each day through Tissana's economy are a fundamental element of livelihoods in a town in which, as my friend Ami once put it, 'if you don't have a market, you don't eat!'

Academics had once taken for granted that wherever the technology for writing exists, spoken words will necessarily come to be perceived as ephemeral in comparison. Yet people in Tissana could quite easily make written records of their contracts, if they wanted to. Despite operating in an economic atmosphere of widespread half-trust, they choose not to. This persistence of people's faith in oral agreements seems to speak to an intuitive respect for the power of spoken words that the availability of writing has done little to diminish.

Given the value of orality in Tissana, it perhaps makes sense that some words will have more 'substance' to them as they have come to be used, shared and exchanged in the well-worn 'trade routes' that link people and things together. In the following section I outline a brief genealogy of blessing exchange in Tissana, tracing how these valuable words have come to be traded in quite different ways in the commercial fishing economy than would have been the case in subsistence farming villages.

7.2 Blessing Economies

The exchange of spiritual blessing for tangible forms of material wealth is, in fact, a fairly well documented phenomenon, and one that appears in religious traditions well beyond West Africa, across the broader Christian and Islamic worlds. A common thread linking analyses of blessing economies in all these various contexts is that they are presented as explicitly hierarchical systems: blessings are distributed in patterns that both mirror and reinforce broader structures of sociopolitical power (Bloch 1986; Ewing 1983). From West Africa (Last 1988; Soares 1996, 2005) to South Asia (Ewing 1983, 1984; Werbner 1998), ethnographers working in explicitly religious contexts have repeatedly described a pattern by which Islamic blessings are distributed ‘downward’ through networks of religious patronage. In each of these examples, high-ranking individuals considered to have privileged access to God are uniquely empowered to bestow blessings, and do so only in exchange for offerings of material tribute from their disciples.

In rural Pakistan in the 1980s, for example, Katherine Ewing (1983, 1984) describes people prescribing to a cosmological order in which God’s blessing is assumed essential for physical health, material well-being and spiritual salvation. Yet God Himself is imagined as such a remote, all-powerful leader that He is wholly inaccessible to ordinary men and women. Only a tiny minority of privileged individuals, living saints who trace their ancestry to Mohammed, are capable of receiving or communicating God’s blessing:

[The saints’] authority is symbolised by spiritual blessing, which has flowed from God to his Prophet Muhammed and then eastward with the saints. Others can come into contact with this blessing and benefit from it, but they cannot transmit it, because blessing cannot flow through their impure or undeveloped souls. (Ewing 1983: 256)

Ordinary people must therefore maintain a face-to-face relationship with their saint, who gives them blessings in return for material offerings of tribute. The blessings themselves may be communicated in a whole range of material or immaterial forms, from recited Koranic verses to complex written amulets. In all cases, however, what is most strongly emphasised is that only the saint’s unique expertise and spiritual charisma renders these blessings effective (Ewing 1984).

Benjamin Soares’ study of religious leaders in Mali reveals how a similarly hierarchical economy of blessings was adapted to meet the new social and political conditions of the

postcolonial state (1996, 2005). Just as we saw in rural Pakistan, it had long been the case that Malian individuals sought access to spiritual development, as well as the this-worldly rewards of 'wealth, power, social prestige, progeny and good health' (1996: 744), through cultivating personal relationships with living saints. The exchange of gifts for prayers had long been one of the most salient features of the saint-follower relationship. However, Soares explores how, in the 1980s and 90s, 'visits to the religious leaders [had] increasingly come to resemble a market-place, in that contact with them [had] come to be mediated on an unprecedented scale by both commodities and money' (2005: 170). The most famous Malian saints had accumulated extravagant material riches through this increasingly 'commodified' form of blessing exchange by learning to reserve their most 'powerful' forms of prayer for their most lavishly generous supplicants, 'so that the elites might obtain what they desire' (2005: 173-4).

Despite the obvious differences between them, one of the most salient characteristics linking these two examples is that blessings always move in the same direction: from elevated individuals who are considered somehow closer to God than ordinary people, towards their followers who give material gifts of tribute in return, 'as a mark of respect or in gratitude for a blessing bestowed' (Werbner 1998: 104). The same, intuitively logical, 'downward' flow of blessings also underpins Murray Last's (1988) account of Nigeria's 'prayer economy', and enables Maurice Bloch (1986) to understand spiritual blessing as a powerful political force in Madagascar.

The most detailed existing descriptions of blessing-exchange in Sierra Leone can be found in Caroline Bledsoe's (1992) account of her fieldwork with Mende-speaking parts of the country in the 1980s. Her account suggests blessing exchange in this region has historically been characterised by a similar pattern of self-evident hierarchy. Whilst she never suggests it would be possible to accumulate lavish material wealth in exchange for blessings, blessing-exchange does appear to have been one means by which those in positions of relative power were able to further entrench their claims to gerontocratic authority. In Bledsoe's account, she consistently describes blessings as 'ancestral blessings', and (rather as Ewing had described in rural Pakistan) maintains that the effectiveness of these prayers depends upon a message being communicated up through a string of relationships between visible and invisible sentient beings:

Because God does not want to face a barrage of individual supplicants of unproven merit, he requires requests to come through the proper authority

channels. Standing between God and a living supplicant, therefore, is a long, hierarchical chain of mediating ancestors — living as well as dead — through whom God confers blessings on families and the young. (1992: 191)

Carol MacCormack made a similar claim with reference to the Sherbro coastal region, that ‘ancestors are the ultimate source of blessings’ (1986: 117).

According to this vision of the social and cosmological order, spoken blessings only carry any meaningful power when they are communicated within certain kinds social relationship. ‘For both Muslim and Christian Mende’, Bledsoe tells us, ‘elders bless younger kin, parents bless children, uncles bless nephews, masters bless apprentices, teachers bless students, etc.’ (1992: 191). Such patterns of blessing exchange map neatly onto a broader political economy of wealth-in-people, in which securing the loyalty of a large pool of dependants is the most important measure of a person’s wealth and power (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962; d’Azevedo 1962a; Little 1967 [1951]; Guyer 1995b; Murphy 2010). In order to earn the blessings that will determine their chances of future success, ‘subordinates’ took care to ‘display gratitude to their benefactors through labour, remittances, and unquestioning loyalty’ (Bledsoe 1992: 191-2).

In my own fieldwork I occasionally did hear accounts of blessings being mobilised in this way, particularly as the means by which traditional teachers were able to demand long-term loyalty from their apprentices. For example, Jacob’s stepson, Sheku, who was born in a farming village near Tissana, had been apprenticed to a Koranic teacher for approaching a decade. Throughout this ten-year training, Sheku had lived with his teacher and worked on the older man’s farm. Now that Sheku had completed his Arabic studies, Jacob was worried his teacher might choose to hold his young apprentice hostage, with the simple threat of withholding blessing:

That teacher has ten or fifteen students. And those boys are working hard for him! They clear his farmland, they lay his farm... Now Sheku has finished his studies, but we will have to pay a lot of money to release him... To release him, we have to pay two bags of rice, one goat, one sheep... Ah, it is a lot of money! You see that? He’s a rich man, that teacher...

Me: What will happen if you don’t pay?

Sheku will just have to stay there and work [on his teacher's farm]. Unless he just leaves. He could just leave. But if he does that [without paying], his teacher will never bless him. And without that blessing he will never prosper.

So, just inland from Tissana, a patron-client economy of blessings continues to operate very similarly to the one described by Bledsoe, and continues to be mobilised in ways that directly reinforce more visible ties of dependency and subordination. For most people on the coast, this rural economy is extremely familiar: if they did not migrate to the coast themselves in adulthood, the vast majority of Tissana's fisherfolk are the children or grandchildren of people who grew up in farming communities similar to the one Sheku lives in. One thing, which is evident in Jacob's description of his stepson's predicament, is that he fully understands and respects the coercive power of spoken blessings, when used in this way, to police 'traditional' expectations of filial loyalty from a young dependant to his patron.

Within Tissana itself, however, blessings circulate through the economy in an entirely different way. It remains the case in the commercial fishing economy, as in more 'traditional' economic settings, that blessings are held to be extremely powerful: a person's relative ability to accumulate them is assumed to account for much of the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful life. Yet, in all my observations of spoken blessings being exchanged in Tissana — and they were, as already mentioned, spoken as a common daily occurrence on the wharf — these encounters barely ever took place between a patron and his or her dependant. Nor did I ever hear anyone refer, in any way whatever, to the mediating role of ancestors in rendering these spoken words meaningful and powerful. Indeed, whilst neighbours, and perhaps even kin, might bless one another on occasion, these exchanges were understood to be most important — *and most potent* — when they took place between two individuals who had *no prior relationship* at all.

If asked to describe the ideal model of blessing exchange, fisherfolk would describe showing material generosity to a stranger, and receiving a blessing in return. In the following monologue, a visiting town chief was mediating a disagreement between two of the residents in my compound: Aminata and her teenage daughter, Ima. Notice how he mobilises the promise of future blessing in order to convince the teenager that she ought to be more obedient to her mother:

‘Look’, he said, pointing to me, ‘We have our stranger sitting here. I, too, am a stranger... If you’re not used to warming water for your mother, how will you know to do it for a stranger? If you’re not used to sweeping for your mother, how will you know to do it for a stranger? There are some children: the moment a stranger arrives in the house, they will know to ask, ‘Do you want hot water or cold [to wash with]?’ It doesn’t matter if you’re as beautiful as Heaven, if you don’t have blessings you’ll never go anywhere in life’.

Pa Stevens’ advice to Ima reveals an important transformation in the way in which people understood the value and the power of blessings. Bledsoe had described ‘ancestral blessing’ as a gift that, by its very nature, is handed down from the ancestral realm, via living elders, to their children in exchange for filial loyalty. Yet, by the time Pa Stevens was speaking on our veranda, only thirty years later, local models of blessing had evolved in such a way that he had to draft in another character — ‘the visiting stranger’ — in order to convince Ima she had hope of accumulating blessings through good behaviour at home.

The fact that Tissana’s residents should have stopped considering ancestral spirits to be ‘the ultimate source of blessings’ (MacCormack 1986: 117) raises two interrelated questions related to the genealogy and function of people and the words they use, or more accurately, the way they use words. Firstly: what has changed in the social fabric of coastal economies to undermine people’s faith in the power of their ancestors? Secondly, and rather more problematically: why do people continue to value spoken blessings, and to seek to accumulate them, when the ancestors who previously underwrote their value have essentially faded from the social landscape? I will address these two questions in turn in the final two sections of this chapter.

7.2.1 *Where Have all the Ancestors Gone?*

In the previous chapter I discussed the immediacy of the ‘underworld’ in people’s everyday experience: unseen, yet powerfully felt just beyond the visible surfaces of landscape and seascape around Tissana. In everyday conversation, my neighbours were interested in this hidden space primarily because it was inhabited by morally ambivalent and potentially dangerous spirits (*min* in Sherbro or ‘devils in Krio), and the equally

dangerous ‘witches’ whose defining characteristic was the ability to transmogrify between human, animal and spirit form.⁴⁵

Far more rarely, some of my oldest informants would tell me that the village ancestors dwelled similarly close at hand, moving through a terrain only slightly removed from the farms and homes of their living relatives. This compression of genealogical history into the contemporary landscape is a familiar theme in the ethnographic literature of this region. Some of the most interesting ethnography in recent decades has explored the ways in which people inhabit a landscape still seething with material and immaterial traces of the past (Ferme 2001; Shaw 2002; Argenti 2007).

In agrarian villages across the Upper Guinea region, genealogical history is usually traced back to a single putative ancestor-figure: the person credited with founding that community and first laying claim to its land. In this context, knowledge of local genealogical history may have powerful political consequences. The more convincingly an individual is able to claim direct descent from the town’s founder, the more likely they are to be recognised as a holder of the land, and to achieve the status of a wealthy patron (Sarró 2010; d’Azevedo 1962b). This expectation — that the only history worth attending to is the kind embedded in the immediate landscape — is illustrated vividly here in Mariane Ferme’s description of a Mende forest landscape in the 1980s:

A casual walk through forest paths can take one by several [grave] sites, and if someone in the company has specific knowledge of them, the conversation often turns to the ruin’s history... As the Mende proverb puts it, ‘A stranger recognises a new grave, but does not know who lies in it’. The crucial knowledge of the underneath of things is not limited to the surface recognition of a grave site but, rather, reaches down into the deeper history of those who are under the surface and into how they got there. (2001: 26)

In Ferme’s description of that agrarian topography, the presence of human remains in the ground seems to stand as a testament to the indivisibility of land and history, and to the fact that certain people, with privileged knowledge, had the right to lay claim to both.

⁴⁵ The terms *min*/devil describes a far more varied cast of spiritual beings: from harmless masked dancers, to the invisible but terrifying Poro devil (see Jędrej 1974).

Writing in 1986, Carol MacCormack had described how, at that time, the people who inhabited the area around the Sherbro Coast based their social organisation upon descent from named ancestors and ancestresses. ‘Ancestors, the living, and those not yet born constitute a great chain of being’: a ‘continuum of existence’ that was punctuated, but not severed, by birth and death (1986: 117). According to this image of the cosmological order, it was important to engage directly with ancestors, and to respect them as active participants in everyday material life. Some of the people who I knew in Tissana continued to take these obligations seriously. For example, Pa Lunsar (who was over eighty years old) always kept a pan of rice aside:

For the person who may come in the night, looking for a place to sleep... They won’t talk to you. You won’t even see them... any day, any day, the dead may pass. If they come, and they see that there is nothing there to eat, they will just leave in disgust.

In Sherbro farming villages there are certain key points in the agricultural calendar when the relationship is made especially explicit between the contemporary population, and the community’s ancestors who continue, in some senses, to reside alongside them. Village ancestors must be begged permission, for example, whenever a fresh farm is cleared, or a new crop planted. This annual cycle of rituals serves to reinforce a powerful expectation that belonging in a place, and being able to prosper there, depend upon being able to claim historical ‘roots’ in the land (Sarró 2010; d’Azevedo 1962b; Knörr and Filho 2010). As we have seen in Chapters 3 and 5, old patterns of land-based dependency between ‘landlords and strangers’ (Dorjahn and Fyfe 1962) have been replaced in the maritime context with newly fluid means of claiming social belonging — and social power.

Elderly residents, who had lived in Tissana since the town was a subsistence village, could remember a time when the whole community used to come together to publicly honour their ancestors. However, such events are, as Mi Yoki describes here, increasingly rare:

First time, when I was young, we used to leave food in this deep forest here, for the ancestors, pour libation... We’d make gladdy-gladdy [celebrate], we’d dance until dawn. But now, they don’t do it anymore... They say they are Muslim, they refuse to do it. Things are changing now, for many, many reasons.

Although Islam and Christianity have both been practised in Sierra Leone for centuries, I often heard people claim that in recent years religious practice has become less tolerant of syncretism with so-called ‘native ways’ — including paying respect to the ancestors.⁴⁶ There are also powerful *socio-economic* reasons why Tissana’s contemporary residents have allowed the town’s ancestors to fade from view as powerful actors in the local social scene.

In contrast to farming economies inland, there is no longer any particular stigma attached to being a ‘stranger’. It is not that anyone questions the fact that the oldest ‘aristocratic’ lineages are the sole rightful holders of the land around Shenge;⁴⁷ but, in an increasingly ocean-facing economy, these ancestral claims bring very little real in the way of actual socio-economic privilege. Here, the best hope of achieving material security and prosperity has depended, for several generations now, not on land rights but rather on boat ownership. We have seen throughout this thesis that the Sierra Leonean stereotype of modern fisherfolk is that they are always half-ready to up-anchor and set sail for a new wharf town. As a town of migrants, almost everyone’s ancestors lived and died somewhere else. As if in vivid recognition of the new disconnect between ancestral history, identity and place, the largest single grave site on the Kagboro coastline is filled, not with the bodies of important ancestors, but rather with those of unknown, unnamed strangers. Here Buema is recalling the aftermath of one particularly horrifying boat disaster some fifteen years ago:

There were so many bodies. The people who went out in their boats to get them, they just heaved them out of the water, like sharks — whomp, whomp, whomp. They're all buried at the wharf in Shenge. When you die at sea, the wharf is your grave... They put them two-by-two in the graves. When you stand on Shenge Wharf, from the jetty all the way until you meet those rocks, it's all one grave. They came from all over – Bo, Kenema, Kono, Plantain: all over. They

⁴⁶ A small but growing number of men nowadays entirely refuse to engage with the Poro society, for example, fearing that its practices represent a form of idolatry: ‘Along the coast... people are more modernised now and are God-fearing... Like Pa Brima: he was head of his society in Ndema, you know? And what do you see him doing now? Just praying, praying, all the time, asking Allah for forgiveness’ (Moses, elder).

⁴⁷ Indeed, I was told of one dispute, several years before my arrival, when an elderly Mende man had attempted to claim ownership of the land his family had been farming for decades. Always the story was repeated with the same incredulous punch line: “But he was a Mende! Came, his people came to this place! How could he own the land?”

came here to work. They were traders. When they pulled their bodies from the water, it was only their clothes you would recognise them by.

If, as Tuan has argued, ‘Rootedness in the soil and the growth of pious feeling toward it seem natural to sedentary agricultural peoples’ (1977: 156), then in Tissana what we appear to be observing is the ‘naturalness’ of this relationship unravelling. Whilst it is no doubt true that, as he put it, ‘places become special... whenever the people believe it to be not only their home, but also the home of their guarding spirits and gods’ (ibid: 150), one could just as well state the relationship the other way around: that places become home to guarding spirits when people believe them to be special. Nowadays, Tissana’s population is so unashamedly fluid, and its economy so squarely oriented to the ocean, that ancestral rootedness in the land is of ever-diminishing salience in people’s lives.

Yet, as Buema’s story about the boat disaster reminds us, there are very real dangers associated with adopting an itinerant livelihood in a country where the transport system and emergency services are as impoverished as Sierra Leone’s. The events Buema described are tragically unexceptional. Within recent living memory, there had been several similarly catastrophic boat disasters in the waters around Shenge. The mass grave beneath the town’s wharf is unmarked and rarely mentioned, but there is no one in Shenge who does not know, as they walk across the beach to travel aboard a *pampa* (passenger canoe), that beneath their feet lie the bodies of hundreds of unnamed travellers who lost their lives on similar journeys. The reasons fisherfolk cite for needing to accumulate blessings reflect the new anxieties of their highly unsettled lives. Quite aside from the dangers associated with sea travel itself, itinerant fisherfolk are justifiably nervous of falling into any kind of difficulty whilst in an unfamiliar town, far beyond the reach of their friends and kin. As one trader recounted to me:

When I first started coming to buy fish here in Kagboro [Chiefdom], I couldn’t sleep at night I was so afraid... Because, you know, if a trader disappears, nobody would even notice! They’d say, ‘Maybe she’s gone to Shenge’, ‘Maybe she’s gone to Plantain’. They wouldn’t know I’d disappeared. Because they don’t know me. They don’t know my people. (Esta, trader)

For people whose lifestyle routinely takes them beyond what is familiar and safe, beyond the reassuring presence of a strong network of kin and long-term neighbours, the protective, generative potential of blessings takes on an added salience.

People in Tissana are not averse to reminding their neighbours of the importance of accumulating blessings as a means of encouraging others to be generous with their material resources. To draw an example from my own experience: it was generally assumed amongst my neighbours in Tissana that, as a white person, I must have been lavishly wealthy. I had difficulty figuring out how to morally navigate the onslaught of requests that were made of me each week so, as my closest friend in Tissana, Buema often took it upon herself to try and protect me from these demands. It was not a role that won her many admirers. On one occasion, Aminata came to my room to offer some furtive advice: ‘Don’t listen to Buema, if she tells you not to [be generous to] people. Do you hear?’ She glanced around to make sure Buema was not within earshot, before leaning a little closer to warn me in an urgent stage whisper. ‘You have come far! You are here, far away from your home and your family. Let you get home safe and with well body. Every time you give to a person, they must say, “Thank you, Jenny, May God bless”.’

Of course, I was far from the only person in town who was ‘far from my home and my family’. Many of the men I saw each day, landing fish on Tissana’s wharf, were relative strangers in town and surrounded by people they barely knew. In the restlessly fluid maritime economy, many others knew they would shortly move on again, leaving behind the hard-won networks of ‘potato rope kin’, which offered their only real source of material security. In this quote, for example, David makes it very clear that his key motivation for trading fish for blessings on the wharf is not only his faith in the concrete efficacy of blessing to yield real, tangible returns, but also his knowledge that, as an *alehning* (migrating) fisherman, he will soon be a stranger himself, and in particular need of the good fortune and protection that blessings are known to bring:

The reason I give people fish is that... there are some goodnesses that you do — as long as you’re here, in your own home town, you’ll never receive any payment. But when you go out [far away from home] — at that time, just when you don’t expect it at all, somebody will give you something, and say: ‘Take this. You use it’. It’s a blessing. Like, if I were to give you fish now, you’d say, ‘Ah, may God bless; may the Lord make your business prosper!’ Allah will take your voice faster!

As we have seen, the busy, multidirectional circulation of spiritual blessings through Tissana's wharf side economy stands in contrast to the model of 'prayer economy' more familiar in the ethnographic record, whereby blessings pass along a certain kind of narrowly defined route, from a spiritually elevated patron, to his or her subordinate. The fact that Tissana's fisherfolk have moved so decisively away from this model reflects a broader set of transformations in the coastal economy, as social hierarchies based on ancestry and landownership have been replaced by evermore complex, fragile, shifting webs of 'potato rope' kinship.

However, these changes also raise an analytical problem: how is it possible that spoken blessings continue to hold value in Tissana's economy in the absence of the ancestor spirits and clear social hierarchies that, until recently, provided the formal explanation for their power? There are fascinating parallels here, with the history of money in the global economy. There were many who feared that the removal of the dollar from the gold standard would cause the implosion of the American economy. And yet, despite such a radical shift in the context within which they were being offered and received, people continued to take it for granted that banknotes were capable of conveying carry enormous economic value:

Whether we look to the emergence of modern stock markets in northwestern Europe in the seventeenth century, or to postbellum greenbacks, or to the closing of the gold window in 1971 and the breakdown of the Bretton Woods agreements that lent an aura of stability to money through the middle of the twentieth century, we find similar debates about the relationship between 'real' economic value and 'insubstantial' fictions of fiat currencies and finance and a concern about the effects of the transition from 'true' money to the promissory kind on the fabric of society itself. (Maurer 2006: 29)

Even if the value of money is, as Bill Maurer puts it, 'a fantastical endeavor' (2006: 16), this does nothing to detract from the powerful -- indeed, *world shaping* -- reality of that material value.

As I discuss in the following section, with a particular focus on 'medicines', spoken words are woven through the very fabric of material culture in Sierra Leone, and often in ways that have rather little to do with communicating a message. By contemplating the substance of words within material culture more broadly, my argument is that spoken blessings can be understood as valuable *things* in their own right, rather than only as a

message or a promise conveyed between ancestral spirits and living persons. This echoes other ethnography from the Upper Guinea region (Ferme 2001; Bledsoe and Robey 1986; Jędrej 1976; Shaw 1997a), and suggests a limit to the argument made by Stanley Tambiah that, in contexts where people appear to behave as though certain spoken words carry an inherent ‘magical’ force, such language is nonetheless better understood as deriving power by virtue of its ‘capacity to communicate with [sentient spiritual beings] and thereby influence their actions’⁴⁸ (1968: 178). It is this very materiality without recourse to ancestral force that has made it possible for blessings to retain their exchange value as they circulated from one economic context to another.

7.3 Words and the Substance of Medicine

‘Medicines’ play a conspicuous role in the sociopolitical lives of all Sierra Leone’s major language groups (Jędrej 1976; Murphy 1998; Ferme 2001). Referred to in Sherbro as *ifohn*, and in Tissanan Krio as ‘fetish medicines’, this category encompasses an array of objects and substances that is hugely heterogeneous in material form and practical function. Some medicines appear as bulky objects, wrapped in bundles of cloth or string; others are worn as amulets, consumed as liquids or powders, or rubbed as a lotion on skin. As their Krio name suggests, some *ifohn* may be used to cure illnesses;⁴⁹ but they are also deployed to influence people’s bodies in a whole range of more covert and potentially ambivalent ways: to poison, seduce or otherwise disempower their subject. We have already seen throughout this thesis that fishermen and *banda* women routinely deploy ‘fetish’ technologies as part of their mundane economic strategies: to protect their property against thieves; to increase their chances of catching fish; and, in particular, to attempt to influence their relationships with the people with whom they do business.

The one characteristic linking this seemingly eclectic array of substances is that all are ‘impregnated with supernatural force’ (Little 1967 [1951]: 227). What interests me in the

⁴⁸ Describing the seemingly nonsensical ‘demon language’ used in Sinhalese exorcism rituals, for example, he argued that, although the words spoken were ‘largely unintelligible’ to the exorcist and his audience alike, they were ‘nevertheless based on a theory of language the demons can understand... the spells have power by virtue of secrecy and their capacity to communicate with demons and thereby influence their actions’ (Tambiah 1968: 178).

⁴⁹ Pharmaceutical drugs are described as *ifohn*, along with more esoteric and carefully guarded forms of medicinal substance.

context of this chapter's discussion is that in many cases this 'supernatural force' only becomes animated when spoken words are uttered into material substance of the *ifohn*. A focus on medicines therefore reveals how often spoken words are mobilised in Sierra Leone as 'illocutionary acts': that is, speech acts that are unconcerned with communicating 'meaning', but that are rather intended to bring about a direct material effect in the world (cf. Lambek 1990). Similar technologies for empowering inanimate objects by infusing them with spoken recitations recur in many parts of the Islamic world (Ewing 1983), as well as elsewhere in tropical Africa (MacGaffey 1988) and provide a neat microcosm for imagining how words and objects might shade into one another, in a context in which 'matter' is obliged to be neither passive nor silent. This is not an entirely radical insight.

Ethnographers have often pointed to *ifohn* as evidence that, in the Upper Guinea region, no clear distinction can be drawn between discursive forms of knowledge and the concrete world of things (e.g. Jędrej 1976; Bellman 1975; Ferme 2001; Tonkin 2000; Bledsoe and Robey 1986; Shaw 1997a). However, existing discussions of immaterial forces tend to focus on a rather narrowly defined range of overtly 'ritual' behaviours, and to be explored within a broader frame of interest in the *political power* of secrecy. As Murphy puts it here, *ifohn* 'designate the most fearful secret forces in the [Sierra Leonean] cosmology of power' (1998: 567). It is an *ifohn*, for example, that sits at the heart of every initiation sodality and which, ultimately, is said to complete the conversion of children into gendered adults (Jędrej 1976), and ethnographers have been interested to understand how the aura of secrecy surrounding these substances works to legitimise the considerable power wielded by society elders (Bledsoe 1984; Murphy 1980). Anthropologists have also been intrigued by the popular discourses that describe powerful 'big persons' deriving their charisma from the secret use of 'bad medicines' (*ifohn wei*): substances acquired by violent means at the ruthless expense of more vulnerable people (Shaw 1996; Ferme 2001; Richards 1996).

This emphasis on the relatively high-level (and/or sinister) political uses of *ifohn* tends to detract attention from fact that medicines exist in myriad forms, most of which are rather banal. Mariane Ferme's (2001) ethnography marked an important step toward considering the presence of unseen forces behind the visible surfaces of 'everyday' material things. But her focus on the high levels of specialist skill required to decipher clues scattered through the material landscape also reinforced the impression that a

practical knowledge of immaterial forces is the preserve of a small minority of people. By considering the material exchange value of spoken blessings, our attention is drawn to the fact that *all* fisherfolk seek to harness and capitalise upon immaterial forces as part of the routine work of managing their fragile livelihoods. In keeping with this broader goal, I turn now to consider one particularly common form of *ifohn*: swear medicines. In the following section I discuss how words addressed to these medicines have real material consequences for the workings of economic life in Tissana.

7.4.1 Swears

In Tissana, strategies for preventing theft are a common matter of concern. As we have seen in Chapter 6, levels of economic mistrust are high here, and not without good reason. The physical contours of the coastal landscape are such that lovers, neighbours, and business partners are constantly moving in and out of view. So, in an unpredictable, threadbare economy, people are highly conscious of their constant vulnerability to theft and fraud. If a person has been cheated or stolen from, there are two accepted courses of action available. If he or she believes they know who was responsible for the crime, they may summon that suspect directly to court. However, those people who have weathered the chieftaincy court system typically warn it is a time-consuming, expensive and ultimately frustrating process. A far more common strategy is to threaten to ‘swear’ upon an *ifohn ranka* (‘swear medicine’) that will ‘catch’ and usually kill the culprit if they fail to confess in time.

As with all *ifohn*, swear medicines are privately owned, and will only be effective if used with the formally expressed permission of the medicine’s owner, permission that is generally paid for in cash⁵⁰ (Jędrej 1976). In extreme cases (of a very major theft, for example), swearing can become an involved and highly public process. If the victim of a crime can afford the time and considerable expense, she might choose to apply to the Chieftaincy Office in Shenge, and obtain an official ‘swear licence’, authorising her to employ the services of a recognised medicine owner. In a handful of famous cases, individuals from Tissana have even been known to travel to the other end of Sierra Leone to seek out a particular ritual specialist, known for possessing a powerful medicine on which they swear.

⁵⁰ In a handful of well-known cases, individuals from Tissana have been known to travel to the other end of Sierra Leone to seek out the owner of a particularly famous *ifohn*.

Ifohn ranka come in a variety of forms. How, exactly, the swear itself is enacted — and how its repercussions are felt — vary dramatically from one case to another. In ‘official’ cases, when bureaucratic authority has been sought, swearing becomes a very high-profile public performance, not least because they are then obliged under the by-laws of Kagboro Chiefdom to give the thief every possible opportunity to confess before their punishment befalls them. In the days leading up to the moment when the swear is finally spoken, the town crier walks the streets, ‘alarming’: giving the culprit or their family one final opportunity to escape the full weight of their punishment.

Or so, at least, I was told. For, in fact, such official cases are extremely rare and none took place during the time I was in Tissana. A far more affordable option is to pay a local medicine owner for the use of their *ifohn*, and then carry out one’s own swear in a private, pared-down fashion. It is in this, the swear’s more common incarnation, that, stripped of the extra legitimising padding of bureaucracy, we see that the fundamental weight of the swear lies in the spoken words themselves:

Here, it is enough just to talk it: to say, ‘This person stole from me,’ or whatever. Sometimes, people will even go outside at night, naked, and talk it; say it aloud. If it is true, if it is a straight case, you will see, very quickly, something will happen to [the thief]... Very often, when someone’s children are dying it is because they have a swear on them. But, as soon as they confess, you will see their children will start to live again. (Pa Lunsar, elder)

This act of speech has powerful consequences, and is not to be treated lightly. Indeed, the power of swears is so widely accepted that, in any case of serious misfortune, there will almost always be speculation that it must be the result of an old swear. I saw this discourse being played out under tragic circumstances when my young neighbour and former housemate, Sina, lost her third and last remaining child:

You see Sina now? You hear — even her mother said it — it is an old swear that has caught her. It was Mary Sese. At that time we were all in this house together. Sina stole something from Mary – I can’t remember what it was. At that time, she wasn’t married yet, she hadn’t borne children yet. When you hear people say, ‘swears don’t catch’, well, no, they don’t catch *now*... When you have married, when your children all die; that is when you see the swear. It is

only now we're seeing that swear catch Sina. And they say Mary is in — ah-ah-ah, that place where they are fishing...? — Funkea! You see? Who is going to go all the way there to find her [to cancel the swear]? (Fatti, petty trader)

The memory was still fresh in my friends' minds of the time, a couple of years before my arrival, when a trader visiting the neighbouring town of Bendu had had all his money stolen. Having done all he could to investigate the theft in person, he eventually returned to his home near Waterloo, where — it was widely agreed — he must have sworn on a medicine known as '*ifohn lamp'eh*':

What else could he do? It was his father's money... So, he went back home and he put a swear on that money. They say three people have died from that swear so far! For a whole year, Bendu was burning. They'd put out one fire — look! — Another fire had started in the next *banda*. That was a powerful swear. (Kumba, fisherman)

Ifohn lamp'eh catches its subjects 'by fire'. But, according to common interpretation, the unusual virility of that particular swear was a result of the words the young man must have used when he addressed the *ifohn*. Worded to target not only the person directly responsible for the theft, but also anyone who sheltered him: those people, once infected by the swear, became similarly contagious themselves, and could inadvertently pass it on to anyone who helped them:

So it was just spreading, like that. It happened: one person went to Plantain Island and, after two or three days, there was a fire there, too! So people became afraid, even to shelter someone. It gave people who came from this area a bad reputation — even as far as Tombo! Even as far as Waterloo! That lasted for some months! People would forget, forget, and then it would catch again! Until the person finally confessed [to the theft]. And then it stopped. (Pa Sufyan, elder)

So, whilst swearing on *ifohn ranka* is recognised as a legitimate form of justice, the young man's particular choice of wording was criticised as a reckless mishandling of the medicine's power.

Although they were the subject of daily animated discussion, and would inevitably be threatened at the climax of all the most heated arguments, my own experience was that people threatened swears with far more enthusiasm than they actually enacted them.

One day, for example, Buema was enraged to discover that she had had 10,000 leones stolen from her purse. The culprit must have been someone in our house. Of that she was certain. With a stamina that never failed to astound me, she stood on our veranda for two hours straight, ‘talking fire’ at a volume that would have been audible several compounds away. Finally, she announced that she was going to swear on that stolen money. If there could be any doubt how serious such a move would have been, she repeated again and again, in her majestic full-lunged bellow, ‘Let them eat my money with their life! If they return it, even if they throw it under my door, no problem! But if they eat my money... they will never steal again, except in the grave!’

The next morning, the money had not been returned. Buema went to meet a local medicine owner, and paid her 4,000 leones to prepare a swear. She then set about gathering the various material ingredients that were needed to activate this particular medicine: fish, a pawpaw, a miniature cooking pot borrowed from one of her neighbours. At each point, she conspicuously announced the progress she was making. Yet, when I asked Jacob about it, he had replied wearily:

She’s not going to swear. I won’t let her. She’s just trying to scare the person so that they return the money. This is what happened with Momi last year. Someone stole her money and, when she said she was going to swear, she found the money on top of her bag... But, even if they don’t repay Buema, I won’t let her do it. Swearing is dangerous! Sometimes it catches the person who you don’t expect. Or maybe the person who took that money cooked food and gave it to you — you don’t know. And then you say you want to catch ‘the person who ate my money’. Sometimes it catches the person who you don’t expect.

Buema’s money never was returned, but nor did she ever make that swear. As this example demonstrates, people were so wary of the volatile powers unleashed by the words of a swear that most were reticent to actually use them. Yet this does nothing to diminish their concrete relevance to people’s economic lives. In a chiefdom with only four under-resourced police officers, and a highly fluid population of over 30,000 residents, people’s shared respect for the efficacy of swears is one of the most important disciplining forces regulating economic behaviour.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by asking how something as light and impalpable as a spoken blessing is able to carry a material exchange value: just as fish do. Perhaps we ought to pause here to question why this valuation would even appear surprising. In the post-industrial North, the vast majority of money, upon which people depend to enable almost every aspect of their daily lives, never exists in any material form. One important conceptual difference between these impalpable conveyers of wealth and the ones that circulate through Tissana's economy is that the former exist as digits — in payslips, receipts, and computer screens — rarely manually written these days, but nonetheless a literary expression of value. By contrast, I have sought to illustrate that, although most people in Kagboro are quite capable of reading and writing, Tissana remains, in almost every practical sense, an oral economy. So many thousands of spoken pledges of debt are exchanged across Tissana each day that these speech acts could meaningfully be described as the town's second market currency. With this in mind, I sought to understand how certain spoken words come to be endowed with a weight of material value in Tissana's economy.

The 'meaning' of the words 'May God bless' might appear fairly self-evident. However, as Webb Keane (2008a) warns us, we should be very wary of assuming that religious words or rituals are transparent windows to religious 'beliefs'. Simply because individuals enact the same ritual behaviours — exchanging similarly worded blessings, for example — is no guarantee that they share the same knowledge about the 'meaning' of those words, nor the source of their power. And if this is true everywhere, it is nowhere more vividly demonstrated than in locations such as rural Sierra Leone, where explicitly esoteric practices result in knowledge of the material order being extremely unevenly distributed.

When we begin from the assumption that ritual words cannot be reduced to evidence for thoughts, then, analytically speaking, the tangible, enduring qualities that enable them to be exchanged and to move into different social contexts — their materiality, in this sense — suddenly begin to appear as their *least* problematic characteristic (ibid). This slide of words, from language to artefact, is far from being unique to West Africa; nor even, indeed, to 'religious' contexts. In a radically different environment — in the bureaucracy of international diplomatic negotiation — Annelise Riles (1998) has

explored the ways in which policy documents come to be valued as objects of prestige exchange: ritually presented, collected and conspicuously displayed by conference delegates who are, in fact, highly unlikely to ever read their contents. In both cases, complex, painstakingly constructed textual artefacts are used and circulated as autonomous semiotic forms, the ‘meaning’ of which has come to stand quite independent of the words embedded within them (cf. Keane 2008a; Coleman 1996).

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise, as I have done in this chapter, that when people in Sierra Leone exchange valuable words, they do so within a very specific epistemological context. In his classic study of Mende swear medicines, Jędrej argued that, ‘whereas ancestors must be begged or cajoled for help with offerings of food... In *hale* [medicines] men have a power over which they have complete control’ (1974: 44-55). My experience in Tissana was that people were actually rather wary of the unexpected chains of causality they might unleash in their use of swear medicines. However, Jędrej’s broader point holds true: by deploying a swear, people are not appealing to spirits, or ancestors, or even God to intervene in their lives. Rather, the words contained within or addressed to an *ifohn* seek to activate the transformative powers inherent within the substance of the material world itself. My argument is that people in Tissana extend a similar intuitive understanding to spoken blessings, valuing these words for a capacity that is independent of their ‘meaning’: to bring about direct albeit unstable consequences in the material world.

It is because people seek to accumulate and manipulate spoken blessings as powerful *things* that these spoken words have retained their material value, even as the social context in which they are exchanged has been transformed beyond recognition. As Webb Keane puts it here: ‘as objects that endure across time, [religious language] can, in principle, acquire features unrelated to the intentions of previous users or the inferences to which they have given rise in the past. This is in part because as material things they are prone to enter into new contexts... Their very materiality gives them a historical character’ (2008: S124). His argument could be read alongside Appadurai’s (1986) important observation that material objects are capable of leading complex, sometimes unpredictable ‘social lives’, and may come to be valued in quite different ways by different people, as they cycle from one economic context to another. As he argues, ‘we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, and their trajectories’ (1986: 4-5).

In the case of the spoken blessings that I witnessed being exchanged on Tissana's wharf, we can see the historical trajectory of these material forms stretching in two directions. In Tissana, as in many parts of West Africa, people often make the link between European wealth and their supposed possession of powerful 'secrets' (Bledsoe and Robey 1986; Soares 2005). In d'Azevedo's description of early encounters between European missionaries and Gola speakers in neighbouring Liberia, we can begin to imagine how Christian language might have become incorporated within existing 'regimes of value' (Appadurai 1986: 4), and, in the process, become imbued with a weight of material value quite different from anything Europeans themselves had previously imagined possible (cf. Pietz 1985):

[T]hose who came from lands across the sea ['kwi'] in great ships with wealth of strange new goods and knowledge were courted and admired for the *djike dje* – the 'new ideas' — which they possessed. *Kwi* had wealth and weapons to buy and enforce authority over the land.... Furthermore, they came with their own teachers who also had a 'book', which contained the laws of their god... The Gola looked upon the early Western missionary in much the same way as he had always looked upon the itinerant Muslim trader and scholar. It was considered advantageous to encourage them in order to learn their ways and the secrets of their power. (d'Azevedo 1962b: 30)

In the present historical moment, Sierra Leonean fisherfolk are once more living through a period of social upheaval. Leading newly mobile, cosmopolitan lives, most have lost interest in maintaining social relationships with the ancestral spirits who, until recently, had been formally credited as providing the power behind spoken blessings (Bledsoe 1990). And yet, rather than fading from the economic topography, what we see is that spoken blessings are coming to be valued in new ways, as they are circulated through novel kinds of economic relationship. In a stretched, unpredictable economy, the material value imbued in blessings has powerful consequences in people's lives. It enables those with nothing to survive, because fishermen — eager to take every available precaution to mitigate the insecurity of their own precarious livelihoods — are prepared to invest considerable resources earning the blessings of neighbours and strangers on the wharf.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

This thesis has offered an ethnographic window into a dynamic, but previously largely unstudied maritime world: a precarious, fluid, frontier economy, quite different from the agrarian villages that dominate our knowledge of the Upper Guinea region. The past fifty years have been a period of profound social and economic transformation across the Yawri Bay, as settlements like Tissana mushroomed from tiny fisher-farmer hamlets to multi-ethnic hubs of commercial fishing, fish processing and trade. Perhaps the best-known contribution made by ethnographers of Sierra Leone over the years has been a rich literature attending to the ways in which *The Powerful Presence of the Past* (Knörr 2010) is woven through the social and material fabric of everyday life (Ferme 2001; Shaw 2002; Basu 2007). Some of the most influential work of the post civil war period has sought to trace the genealogy of the contemporary social tensions within rural communities back through a centuries-long history of Atlantic and domestic slavery (Richards 2005; Peters 2010). However, when we see how rapidly the Yawri Bay's emergent fishing towns have acquired new, more fluid, structures of power and kinship, it reminds us of the dangers of overly reifying the past. In a recent conversation about the particular challenges of 'theorising from Africa', Achille Mbembe (in Shipley, 2010) argued that in many parts of the continent people are experiencing a period of such dramatic social and economic transformation that:

The ways in which societies compose and invent themselves in the present—what we could call the creativity of practice—is always ahead of the knowledge we can ever produce about them... 'the social' is less a matter of order and contract than a matter of composition and experiment. (2010: 654-5)

Certainly this resonates well with my own experience in Tissana. Like many youthful 'frontier' towns or other sites of proto-urbanisation (e.g. Mitchell 1956; De Boeck 2001; Walsh 2003; Beuving 2010), arrivals into Tissana often experience it as a space of new freedoms and possibilities. But the Yawri Bay is also a space of considerable social, moral and ontological uncertainty. Even as the town's neophyte fisherfolk learn to adapt to this fickle, fluid maritime world, they are already having to improvise new livelihood strategies to cope with the rapid depletion of their coastal ecology. Throughout the five empirical chapters, I have traced some of moral fissures and material tensions that surface throughout the town's social fabric, as emergent patterns of gendered mobility

and shifting modes of economic relationships have led people to reconsider previously taken-for-granted knowledge about what constitutes kinship, intimacy, social power and responsibility.

The thesis makes two broad contributions to the anthropology of West Africa. Firstly, my ethnography adds another layer of nuance to the existing literature exploring the relationship between economies and moralities, both in the Upper Guinea region, and more broadly. The study sits within a recent wave of research working to shed light on the stark realities of lives lived in poverty. In a global economic climate in which ‘precarity has inserted itself into the heart of anthropology itself’ (Muehlebach 2013: 238), some of the most compelling ethnography to emerge over the past few years has been concerned with exploring the opportunities, anxieties and constricted forms of agency available to people navigating through conditions of extreme economic uncertainty (Walsh 2012; Archambault 2013; Mills 2013; Han 2012; Simone 2005, 2006). Much of my empirical discussion has been concerned with exploring various corollaries of a single basic underlying tension: for many of those who chose to migrate to the Yawri Bay, the greatest appeal of maritime life was that it appeared to offer a kind of moral simplicity and personal independence that would have been unthinkable within the patron-client strictures of a farming village. However, the reality is that, in a material environment as stretched as Tissana’s, it is difficult to survive without becoming re-meshed in a new forms of potentially extractive relationship.

The second contribution has been to explore how such ongoing material insecurity intersects with and is productive of Sierra Leone’s famous ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’ (Ferre 2001), as well as its particular construction of the material order. Running as a thread throughout the ethnographic chapters, we have seen repeated examples of the ways in which unambiguously pragmatic livelihood strategies are interwoven with material strategies that might appear to belong to the sphere of ‘ritual’ or ‘esoteric’ practice. Anthropologists working in Sierra Leone have often pointed to the ways in which spiritual agencies are seen to inhabit material substances, in a context in which hidden, sequestered realms of knowledge and action play a central role in political life. What I have worked to reveal through my ethnographic discussion is how these particular constructions of im/materiality are both revealed — and produced — through the mundane practices of artisanal fishing, gift-exchange and relatedness. My approach has been to treat the material value of fetish medicines, swears and blessings not so

much as a matter of ‘belief’, but rather as a simple economic *fact* with direct consequences for the ways in which people seek to balance their tight livelihoods.

8.1 Contested Freedoms

A common tension running through many aspects of everyday relations in Tissana is that, whilst people aspire to ‘freedom’, networks of intimate social relations provide the strongest available source of material security. Over the years, ethnographers have often returned to the argument, made by both Marx (2000 [1946]) and Simmel (1978 [1900]), that market-based systems of reckoning value and mobilising labour have the effect of eroding social bonds, replacing them instead with a system of fleeting and impersonal transactions. The classic ethnographic literature on ‘modernisation’ is rich with examples of people responding to these transformations with a profound sense of unease (Bohannan 1959; Taussig 1980; Burkhalter and Murphy 1989). However, the people I knew rarely expressed regret for the lost morality of ‘traditional’ village life. Quite the contrary: the rural hinterland is most often caricatured as a space of inhumane patrimonial extraction.

Chapter 3 introduced Tissana through the personal narratives of migrants who had at different points over the past fifty years chosen to risk everything to flee conditions in their home villages, which they described as exploitative or dangerous, and begin a new life on the sea. For some readers, these stories will have a familiar ring: there are striking resonances between the accounts of the village émigrés I knew in Tissana, and the grievances expressed by ex-combatants when asked to explain what prompted them to join one of the factions in Sierra Leone’s civil war (Richards 2005; Humphreys and Weinstein 2006, 2004; Peters and Richards 1998). We saw some of the ways in which neophyte fishermen attempt to safeguard their newfound independence: choosing to live recklessly ‘in the moment’ rather than become trammelled in the obligations and responsibilities associated with close social bonds. However, the chapter ended by acknowledging that such aspirations to ‘freedom’ are rarely more than fleetingly realised. Vulnerable crewmen navigate a narrow line between dependency and destitution, ever at risk of falling into patterns of indentured labour that people in Tissana likened to ‘slavery’ (*wono*).

Chapter 4 continued to develop a similar line of argument, although this time through the lens of gendered economic relations. In an apparent inversion of more familiar narratives of economic nostalgia, the people I knew in Tissana looked back longingly to their town's fleeting economic 'boom', during which sales of fish on the wharf had seemed to come close to that of a simple, *impersonal* market. As catches have become smaller and less predictable in recent decades, women's livelihoods have come under even greater pressure than those of the fishermen with whom they do business, and many *banda* women reflect on their creeping material impoverishment through a discourse that emphasises the growing necessity of nurturing intimate social relationships with the men whose fish they want to buy. However, in contrast to an existing literature on 'fish-for-sex' in East African fisheries (Allison and Janet 2001; Westaway *et al.* 2007; Seeley 2009), the focus of the chapter was not on female victimhood. Rather, I sought to reveal the creativity of women's material strategies, as they work to initiate and cement trading partnerships with men: sometimes through public loans of cash, gifts of rice, and good advice; sometimes by more covert means, including sexual seduction or the strategic deployment of fetish medicines (*ifohn*).

Chapter 4 was also the first ethnographic chapter to discuss the powerful sense in which space is gendered in the maritime topography: with profound repercussions for how members of both genders are able to manage their social and economic lives. Whilst Tissana's women lead largely sedentary lives, seagoing fishermen are, by contrast, extremely mobile. Men routinely opt to land their boats, and sell their catch, on the wharf of a town other than their home. When they do, the transactions that take place on those foreign wharfs are often charged with a heightened sense of urgency, opportunity – and risk. There are fascinating echoes of much longer-standing regional constructions of gender, in which young people were only considered to become fully male or fully female after periods spent in ritual segregation in their respective societies' 'bush' (MacCormack 1977, 1980). And, as in those more ritualised contexts of segregation, the borderland spaces where men and women come back into contact are 'highly charged and potentially dangerous' (Bledsoe 1984: 465). According to their playful moral narratives, fishermen claim to fear becoming entrapped on these foreign shores: first seduced, and later bound to their new *kustoment* by bonds of monetary indebtedness.

These tales of economically predatory seductresses are one example of a much more diffuse set of tensions that recur in various guises throughout the thesis, but which are explored most explicitly in **Chapter 5**. However much fishermen might self-romanticise the ‘free mobility’ and rugged masculinity of their unpredictable lives, this very unpredictability is generative of enormous day-to-day anxiety: for themselves and, perhaps especially, for the people with whom their lives are entangled. For cosmopolitans, confident of their long-term material security, constant movement and social change may be empowering. However, speaking here about the urban poor in Mumbai, Arjun Appadurai captures the unrelenting sense of insecurity experienced by people for whom life is *both* socially fluid *and* materially precarious:

Many things in life have a temporary quality — not only physical resources, spatial resources, and housing but also social, political, and moral relations, and relations to the source of power... A huge amount of their social energy and personal creativity is devoted to producing, if not the illusion, then the sense of permanence in the face of the temporary. The phenomenology of the temporary must be carefully distinguished by group location in the political economy... The temporariness of things if you are a high-level speculator in the derivatives market of Bombay is very deeply different than if you are living in a viaduct in Bombay. (2003: 47)

Surviving in this unpredictable economy without a strong network of social relations would be a risky strategy indeed. In **Chapter 5**, we saw how the massive daily traffic in gifts of fish and dishes of rice that move between fishing boats, kitchens and homes across the townscape can be read as a throbbing, ever-shifting map of each person’s ‘potato rope kin’. There is a very real sense in which these gifts are the substance out of which Tissana’s social fabric is woven. However, beneath the initial impression of munificence and mutual generosity, there are two respects in which this traffic in gifts points towards more ambivalent dynamics in Tissana’s social life. Firstly, the sheer volume of this gift economy is evidence of the unrelenting material work people are required to invest simply to construct some semblance of social security, in a context where one’s *subabu* is liable to leave town at any moment. As we saw, this is not a struggle at which everyone succeeds. Because ‘potato rope’ bonds must be *made* and then materially *remade* rather than ever simply assumed, the poorest families are liable to collapse and unravel as rapidly as they were formed.

Secondly: set against a broader historical context in which the most intimate relationships have often been the site of greatest exploitation, the material relationships that people work so hard to create and nurture are also often regarded with a deep sense of moral ambivalence. Where many people are only just managing to balance their fragile livelihoods, the pragmatics and morality of exchange are rooted in the fundamental material needs of *survival*. Few substances are more strongly coveted, more emotive or immediately powerful than *food*. However, complex expressions of social power are smuggled alongside the most innocuous-looking gift of rice: with ‘fetish’ medicines widely in circulation, a gift of rice is at once the substance of survival and, potentially, a potent expression of control.

As this final point reveals, and as I move on to discuss in more detail in the following section, a careful attention to the materiality of everyday economic transactions can provide a window into people’s shared knowledge of the fabric of the material order, and the kinds of agency people are able to exert through material substances.

8.2 Economies and Materialities

There is a long history of interest amongst ethnographers of the Upper Guinea Coast attempting to unravel the complex ways in which the material world is inhabited with, and animated by, unseen agencies (Ferme 2001; Bledsoe and Robey 1986; Shaw 1997a; Jędrej 1974, 1976; Tonkin 1979, 2000; Bellman 1984; Murphy 1980, 1998). One assumption all these ethnographers seem to share is that Sierra Leone’s particular constructions of im/materiality can only be understood as one facet of a broader politics of secrecy. Within this view, ‘true’ knowledge of the material order can only be held by a small minority of especially skilful or powerful persons. In **Chapter 6**, my own ethnography added another level of nuance to this literature, by exploring how Sierra Leone’s long-standing cultural aesthetic of concealment intersects with the physical contours of a maritime topography. As we saw, the Yawri Bay’s seascape provides ample opportunity for people to move in and out of view: across the watery horizon, or into the hidden spaces of the ‘witch world’. From my own limited vantage point on the wharf, I witnessed the considerable fields of suspicion and anxiety that circulate around these hidden spaces, as people assumed their neighbours were covertly defrauding

them just beyond their frame of view. To this extent, my ethnography supports the widespread ethnographic image of this region as one in which *practical* strategies of secrecy and concealment are an important element of many aspects of social, political and economic life.

And yet, in other respects, my goal has been to erode this aura of esotericism that infuses so many ethnographic accounts of the Upper Guinea Coast. With its seemingly mysterious secret societies, elaborate practices of esoteric knowledge, and dark history of slavery and violence, rural Sierra Leone has proven particularly fertile ground for ethnographers with a poetic preference for the other-worldly. Almost a century has passed since Edwin Walter wrote of Sherbroland that ‘such a country evidently deserves to be called a land of mystery’ (1917: 160), and a similar tone has — to a greater or lesser extent — continued to permeate much of the writing about this region ever since (Shaw 2002; Ellis 1999; Włodarczyk 2006). In the wake of a civil war, caricatured in the global media as both appallingly barbarous and inscrutably exotic (Włodarczyk 2006), those of us working to describe everyday life in Sierra Leone have an even stronger responsibility than most to be wary of any representation that smacks of exoticism. For the people who live there, there is nothing ‘mysterious’ about the daily, grinding struggle to survive in a place like Tissana.

By focusing on people’s everyday judgements of the material value of different substances — from life-sustaining foodstuffs, to unseen *ifohn*, and impalpable words — we gain insights into an embodied knowledge of the im/material order that is not secret at all, but rather taken for granted, and shared by all people. This methodological approach was developed most explicitly in **Chapter 7**, where I sought to illustrate that, under certain circumstances, spoken words carry a material exchange value within Tissana’s everyday economic order. Beginning at the most seemingly mundane level, I argued that, although most people in Tissana did learn to write at school, they do not use written records as part of their economic relationships. In an world in which almost everyone is embedded in complex webs of credit and debt, spoken promises are valued as highly as written contracts would be in a more literary society. These oral pledges circulate through the everyday economy in such high volumes, they could meaningfully be described as the town’s second currency. I then moved on to consider seemingly more ‘esoteric’ or ‘supernatural’ expressions of the material value invested in words. From the blessings that fishermen accept on the wharf in exchange for their precious

catch, to the ways in which spoken words are woven into the material fabric of various power objects, people in Tissana take it for granted that spoken language can exert a direct influence in the material world, in a way that has little to do with communicating 'meaning'. We saw that, because people seek to accumulate and manipulate spoken blessings as powerful *things*, these spoken words have retained their material value, even as the social context in which they are exchanged has transformed almost beyond recognition.

Here, my research speaks to that familiar genre of ethnographic writing, which interprets people's stories of 'the occult' as a series of moral commentaries directed against the injustices of the 'modern' economic order (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 298; cf. Meyer 1995; Ciekawy and Geschiere 1998; Geschiere 1992; Shaw 1997a, 1997b). As we saw in the introduction to this thesis, other anthropologists have criticised this trope for reproducing familiar moral binaries in ways that risk obscuring the moral complexity of real people's economic experience (Sanders 2003, 2008; Sumich 2010). What is less often questioned, however, is the underlying assumption: that narratives presenting 'occult' activity as a route to material enrichment should be read as a metaphorical trope reflecting on economic life, not as a window onto the actual material *workings* of economic life. What Sanders shares with the anthropologists whose work he criticises is a view of popular African economic discourses that 'hover over the material world but [do not] permeate it' (Ingold 2000: 340). A broader critique might seek to emphasise that people's fears about the violent strategies available to their most ruthlessly greedy neighbours are informed by the same basic knowledge of the material world that also shapes their own mundane livelihood strategies.

So, for example, in Sherbro-speaking regions of Sierra Leone, there is a long genealogy to the knowledge that human bodyparts may be used to concoct extremely potent forms of 'fetish medicine' (*bor-fima*), capable of imbuing previously ordinary individuals with exceptional charisma. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, Sherbroland was notorious for the reputed power of its Bor-fima society:⁵¹ a secretive sodality described as similar in structure to the Poro or Bundu, except for the fact that members would take turns to sacrifice one of their dependants to replenish the sodality's powerful medicine (Burrows 1914; Gray 1916; Kalous 1974; Fyfe 1975). Many Sierra

⁵¹ known to English speakers as the 'Man-Leopard' or 'Alligator' society, depending on the method used to dispose of victims.

Leoneans take it for granted that similar technology remains an important source of power for contemporary ‘big’ persons (Shaw 1996; Ferme 2001). Interrogating the truth of these stories falls beyond the scope of this thesis (although see Pratten 2007).

However, what we have repeatedly seen throughout this thesis is that less powerful forms of ‘fetish’ (*ifohn*) — often incorporating the hair, clothes or nail clippings of the individual they are intended to influence — are in common circulation through Tissana’s covert economy. You may recall Jacob warning me to be wary of accepting any gift of cooked food, due to the strong possibility that ‘they might have put something in it — to influence you’. Alongside the town’s busy trade in gifts of rice and fish runs a parallel, though less tangible, traffic in *ifohn* (fetish medicines). Most people claim to disapprove of their use. Yet the common circulation of ‘fetish medicines’ is also taken for granted as an integral element of everyday economic negotiations. As we saw in **Chapters 4 and 5**, these hidden substances are widely regarded as amongst the most effective, affordable and commonplace means of creating, strengthening or otherwise manipulating the webs of relatedness that will make the difference between a person’s relative prosperity and their destitution.

The interesting point in the context of my own discussion is that, for medicine murder to ‘make sense’ as a plausible route to wealth and influence requires a particular set of assumptions about not only *who* holds power and how they might be prepared to abuse it, but also, at a more ontological level, what power *is*, how it functions, and how it operates through human bodies and material substances. The same basic knowledge of the material world underpinning people’s fears of occult violence also informs these more banal economic encounters, by dictating how it is possible for a person to exert their agency in and through material things.

Conclusion

This thesis has revealed various facets of the work Sierra Leone’s fisherfolk invest, as they struggle to create some semblance of personal security in a context of often desperate scarcity. As we have seen, these material anxieties are compounded by the fact that the basic rules of social life appear chronically unstable. Even as patterns of

gendered intimacy, family belonging, and patrimonial responsibility are shifting into new unpredictable forms, people in Tissana devote a huge amount of their energy and material resources attempting to strategically nurture the ‘right’ networks of personal relationships: the social bonds that will be able catch them, when their fish catches fail.

However, if the empirical focus of this thesis has been on fishing, gift exchange and relatedness, then these everyday livelihood practices turned out to be a surprisingly fertile window into what Foucault once called *The Order of Things* (2005[1966]). As we have seen, people’s most pragmatic livelihood strategies were often informed by a set of convictions about the material order, and about the scope of human agency within that order, that I did not share with my informants. Ethnographers working in Sierra Leone have often pointed to the intriguing interrelationship between material things and unseen agencies (Ferme 2001; Jędrej 1974, 1976; Tonkin 2000), although rarely through the lens of mundane economic exchange.

When we acknowledge the material value of spoken words, or the material force of mundane fetish technologies within Tissana’s economic transactions, two things happen. Firstly, this expanded view of economic life allows us to cast a sideways glimpse at how people intuitively understand the fabric of their material world, and the threads of causality that hold it together. Secondly — and arguably more importantly — we are immediately granted a much broader panorama of the material strategies people use to obtain credit, to negotiate a gift of fish, to protect themselves from witchcraft attacks: in short, to *survive* in this desperately stretched economy. The fact that people hold spoken blessings to possess a weight of material value, *matters*. This is not just a matter of representation or ‘belief’. It has real consequences for people’s livelihoods. Like fish or rice, blessings are the stuff out of which economic (and therefore social) relations are made.

Perhaps we cannot fully understand anyone’s economic behaviour without first asking: *What kinds of substances are materially capable of holding value? What kinds of substances can be possessed, or traded, or used to exert a direct influence within the physical world?* Given the ‘fantastical’ (Maurer 2006: 16) quality of money itself, there are few places in the world where these deceptively simple questions would not yield complex and fascinating answers. By considering the ways in which people practice social constructions of im/materiality through their everyday economic behaviours, we

can begin to glimpse how *The Order of Things* shapes, and is simultaneously shaped by, people's practical and micropolitical struggles of survival.

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Appendix: Figures



Figure 1: Satellite image of the Shenge Peninsula (Source: Google Maps, 2013).



Figure 2: The Highway, the only land route to Shenge.



Figure 3: Fish traders preparing for a journey along the Highway.

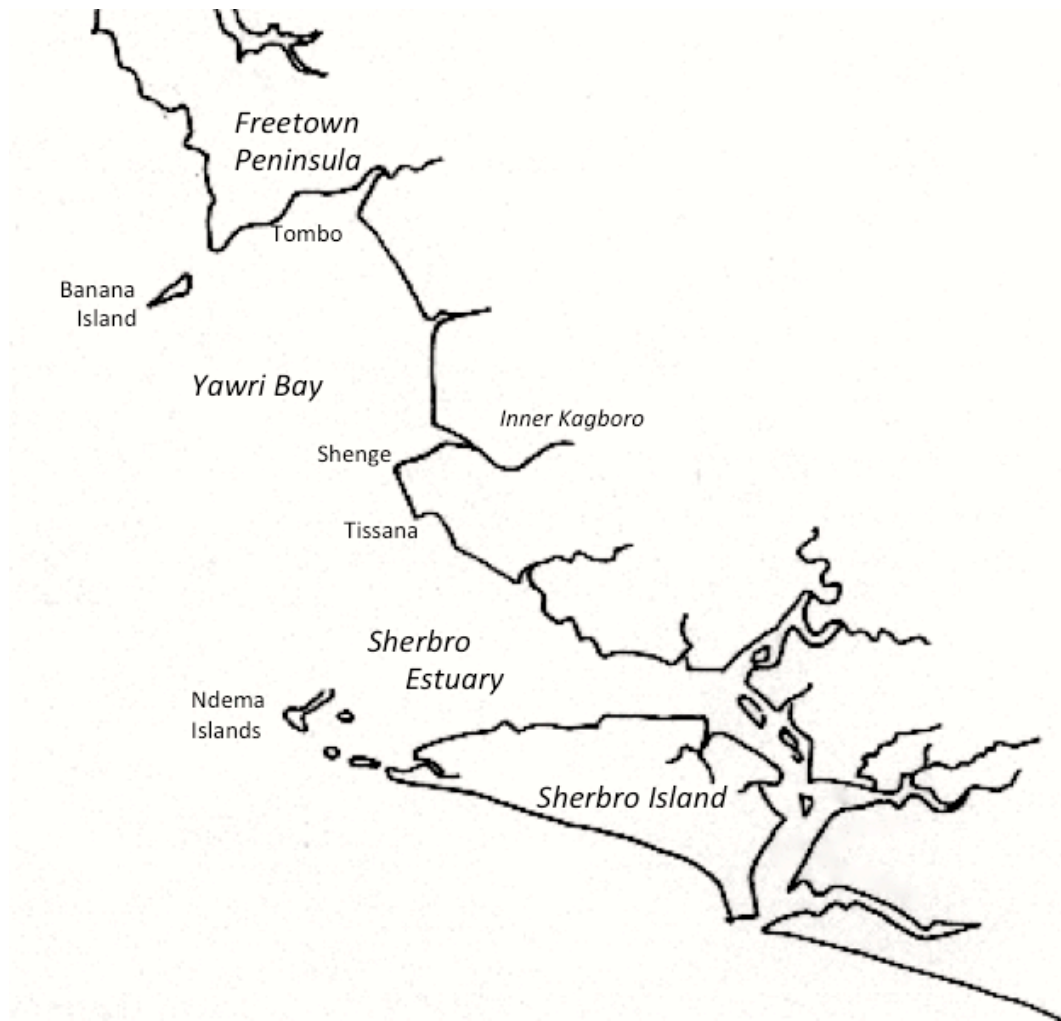


Figure 4: Map of The Yawri Bay and Sherbro Estuary



Figure 5: Fishing Canoe.

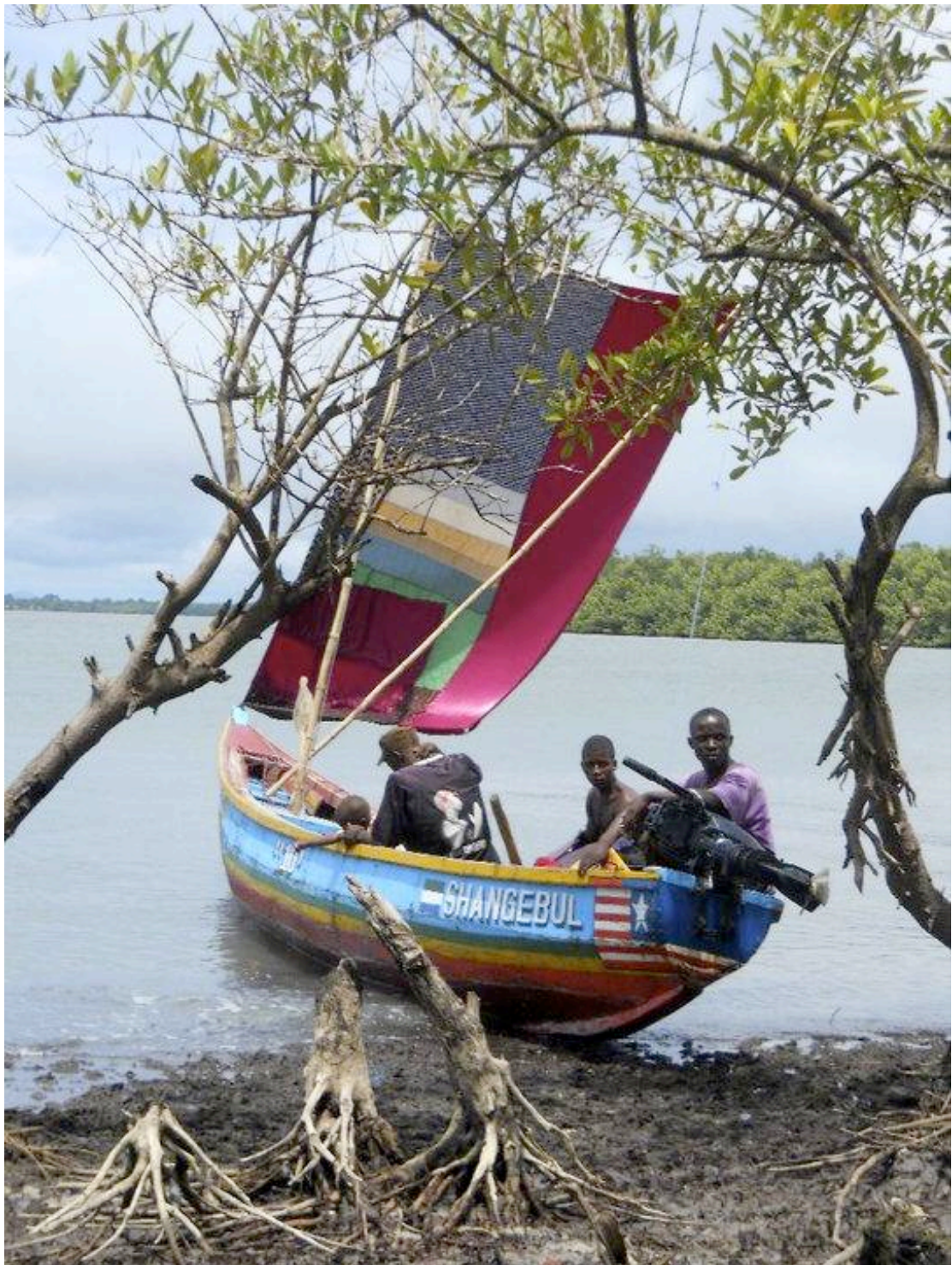


Figure 6: Yele boat.



Figure 7: Men and women *sim-boat* fishing.



Figure 8: The back veranda of my compound, 'Site'.



Figure 9: A disappointing *sim-boat* catch.



Figure 10: The passenger canoe (*pampa*) to Tombo.



Figure 11: Fisherman weaving a new fishing net.



Figure 12: Inside a smokehouse (*banda*), on the day of a remarkable catch.



Figure 13: The ever-busy wharf on Plantain Island.



Figure 14: Buema pictured with one of the pots from George Thomas's era.



Figure 15: Fish traders from Kono preparing to leave Tissana after almost a month in town.